

After Your Pastor Leaves by Rev. Peter Hogeterp (updated, December, 2023)

Pastor George just retired after a long-term ministry at Bethel; he was dearly loved and will be sorely missed. Pastor Cynthia's ministry at Hope Church ended badly, both for her and for the church, which has a history of troubled ministries. First Church has been without a pastor for a long time; many members blame the extended vacancy on the previous pastor, whom they believe bad-mouthed their congregation to his colleagues.

And so it goes. Pastors come and pastors go. When pastors leave, churches grieve—whether the previous pastor's ministry went well or poorly.

Some churches face a pastoral vacancy as though they are a marching band “marking time,” moving their feet but not going forward. They begin the search process for a new pastor with a touch of cynicism, wondering if they will ever find the “right” match. Other churches see their pastoral vacancy as a time to save some money, maybe replace the carpeting in the sanctuary or repave the parking lot—whatever project has been put on hold.

For many years now, the Christian Reformed Church's Office of Thrive has offered a more intentional transition process for “vacant” churches. More specifically, it offers churches a number of Specialized Transition Ministers (STMs) who have been trained in guiding a church through the process of finding a new pastor.

Covenant CRC in Winnipeg, Manitoba, took advantage of that guidance in their transition process some years ago. This is their story.

When Covenant's previous pastor left, at his recommendation the church council contracted with an STM who would spend a year with the church helping the congregation resolve some of the significant issues of the past, discover their strengths and areas for growth, and determine a course for the future.

Covenant is a merged church—a product of the joining of the original Christian Reformed church in Winnipeg with its 100+ year history and a second-generation immigrant church that was started in the early 1960s.

The relatively large merged congregation built a beautiful new building in 1996, and many men and women from both congregations worked side by side to complete construction. That appeared to unify the two churches, but more likely the project masked the differences in the personality of each church.

As those differences began to find expression over time, the membership began to polarize around certain issues. The first pastor who served the newly merged church came in 1999 and left in 2008.

The Past

To begin the transition process and assist the Specialized Transition Minister Covenant's council appointed a Transition Team, made up of people from a cross-section of the membership who knew the congregation well and were respected by the membership. The STM served as their coach.

The transition process is composed of three phases that focus on the past, the present, and the future. The process itself began with a storytelling event, where members were invited to write down significant memories of their involvement in the church. Using newsprint hung on the walls of the fellowship hall, divided into decades, about 100 people wrote their history.

This first phase, focusing on the past, serves to bring church members into the transition process by involving them in a nonthreatening way in telling a story that is uniquely theirs.

The Present

The second phase attempts to discover the church's current strengths and areas for growth. Covenant did this in two segments. First, they conducted a survey asking 40 questions about the church's life (they used the "SurveyMonkey" tool at [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com)).

From the results of that survey, the Transition Team isolated 11 issues around which the membership had the widest range of opinions. The team then designed three discussion opportunities for members to explore those issues face to face; about 125 people participated.

The discussions gave members a forum in which they could talk and listen to each other, and one of the things they learned was how diverse their opinions are.

The Future

The third phase is the future-oriented phase. Covenant's Transition Team took the 11 issues from the second phase, put those issues together into five topics, and designed discussion groups to look at how the church might do things in the future. About 135 people participated in these groups. The process concluded with the Specialized Transition Minister writing a final report with recommendations coming out of those discussion groups that will set the church's direction for the future.

"I think we are in a much better position to begin the calling process now than we were nine months ago," said Rob Booy, a member of Covenant's Transition Team

"The transition process has revived a sense of vision within the congregation," said team member Teresa Doornbos. "The process itself is thorough, thought-provoking, and well worth the time and effort involved. The discussions got people involved in the church again. People are feeling like they are part of an exciting change. . . . People are learning to listen to other people's opinions and are backing off of their own agendas. We are repositioning our path from our own wants towards God's desires for us."

What Makes It Work

This is only one church's story; no two transition stories are the same. Each STM is a unique person, and each church is in a unique situation with its own challenges. Each will have a different experience.

The following factors, however, contribute to the genius of Specialized Transition Ministry:

The STM is not a consultant, but rather serves as the temporary resident pastor, doing what pastors typically do— preaching, teaching, visiting, performing weddings and funerals, and so on. He (currently all are male) “lives with” the congregation.

The STM is not eligible to be called as the next pastor; this gives him/her greater freedom to be both more creative and more confrontational than a permanent pastor might be.

The process is designed to give a voice to everyone in the church, and it provides opportunities for members to listen to each other.

The process engages people early on, in non-threatening ways, by inviting them to tell their stories (not a factual history, but a history of memories).

Through a survey and in discussion groups, the members themselves discover and articulate the church’s strengths and growth areas as they experience them.

The future direction for the church gets developed at the grass-roots level, and members “buy into” it because they helped design it. Peter Scazzero writes, “In emotionally healthy churches, people . . . understand that leadership in the kingdom of God is from the bottom up, not a grasping, controlling, or lording over others” (The Emotionally Healthy Church, p.110).

The STM program helps a church go into the calling process with a clearer understanding of where they believe God wants them to go and of the kind of pastor who will lead them there.

If you think this transition process would be helpful for your church, please contact the Thrive office at thrive@crcna.org.