

## UNINTENTIONAL INTERIM

Doulos Resources; February, 2009 "Special circumstances; the Unintentional interim"

A friend of mine recently learned-- the hard way-- that he was in a type of position I call the "unintentional interim."

Here's the lay of the land: the pastor that served this congregation before my friend was their pastor for several decades. He was beloved by his people, and served them faithfully. This isn't to say that there were not surely more difficult times, but over their many years together they learned how to weather those difficult seasons more easily. By the end of his tenure as their pastor, his ministry was marked more by how well he knew his flock-- and how instinctively he could attend to their needs-- than by anything else.

Because of health difficulties with this long-tenured, outgoing pastor, it wasn't possible to execute a well-planned, thoughtful hand-off from him to his successor. It may be the case that such a hand-off was not in view at all, or that circumstances didn't allow one to take place. Regardless, there was only so much that was done to ensure that the new pastor would be empowered for a long, effective ministry.

In comes my friend: new to pastoral ministry and fresh out of seminary, hopeful for a fruitful and long ministry among his new congregation. Over the course of his first two years of ministry there, however, it became clear to him that a portion of the congregation wasn't ready for a new pastor; consciously or not, they still wanted their beloved former pastor instead of this new fellow. Before long, it was apparent that my friend's only true choice was to resign and move on.

### **Why it didn't work**

There are a small handful of factors at play that are unique to that particular pastor and congregation, and I won't address those. However, there are several factors that are true of nearly all churches with a long- (or longer) tenured pastor that, in this case, led to the failure of his successor. We can recognize and avoid these.

- **They needed to grieve the loss of their beloved pastor.** When a pastor leaves, the congregation needs to deal with the sense of loss they experience. This is true regardless of the circumstances of the pastor's departure, but particularly in cases where the pastor was loved and isn't leaving under duress or troublesome conditions. In some cases, the outgoing pastor retires in the area, stays on as an emeritus pastor, or in some way remains present-- and in many ways, this can be even worse. There is still a substantial sense of loss ("he is no longer my pastor") that a congregant can be made to feel like he/she shouldn't have ("at least he's still in the area"). There must be a good, healthy grieving by the whole congregation, especially the leadership and others who were personally close to the outgoing pastor.
- **They needed to actively plan the hand-off.** Churches-- and especially the leadership, be it a Session, a Board, or what have you-- must address confidently and realistically the need for a succession plan. Many avoid this because they fear it will stir up concern among the members, or make a pastor feel like he is being pushed out. But the truth is that *there is going to be a*

*hand-off whether you plan for it or not.* So you may as well plan for it, to ensure that it is done as well as possible. This should take place well before the pastor plans or needs to leave. I recommend highly the book on this subject called *The Elephant in the Boardroom* by Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree (Jossey-Bass, 2004) for guidance on how to do this well.

- **They needed to seek someone similar, but not identical, to the outgoing pastor.** This was one of the factors that, in some ways, created the biggest problems for my classmate: his style of relating to the congregation was fairly different from his predecessor, if for no other reason than my friend didn't have 20+ years of history with them. Their preaching styles were quite different as well. This is common in pastoral transition for a church; consciously or unconsciously, they think, "this is our chance to fill in the gaps that we realize were missing with our previous/outgoing pastor." What they need, though, is someone who will expand the pastor's ministry to meet some of the most important needs that the previous pastor wasn't able to touch on, while not sacrificing the most important needs that the previous pastor DID meet that the previous pastor DID meet. This can be difficult, but it almost always means finding someone who is like the outgoing pastor in many ways.
- **They needed to be patient and forgiving.** In many ways, they tried their best to do this-- and that is to their credit. Anytime a church gets a new pastor, there *must* be a season where everyone extends an extra measure of grace and forgiveness to each other, and especially to the new pastor. Most pastors are given this grace period, at least to a degree; in some ways, it happens whether the congregation is intentional about it or not. For someone following a long-tenured pastor, it ought to be consciously and intentionally offered, and it ought to be for a longer time period than "normal" (which is usually between 6 months and a year, at most). I'd like to see such a grace-period last at least 18 months to two years for such a church.
- **They needed to work with him in his ministry.** One of the big differences between a long-term pastor and a newcomer-- especially when the new pastor is recently out of seminary-- is that the seasoned, long-tenured pastor has a clear understanding of both role and expectations. The new pastor needs to be counseled in both in a helpful, godly manner by the leadership of the church. For a very new pastor, this may be as basic as helping him learn what it means to be an Elder in the church! He simply may not have enough experience to *know how* to do things like visitation, counseling, etc. Even an experienced pastor might be helped by some frank discussions about how the pastor has fulfilled his role in this congregation's past. There must also be clear, upfront discussion about expectations. It is too easy for a congregation to assume that the incoming pastor knows and shares their expectations-- but they should assume nothing of the sort. Instead, they should assume that the most helpful thing they could do-- for themselves and for the incoming pastor-- would be to spell out their expectations in as concrete a manner as possible.

**They should have seriously considered an interim pastor.** An interim pastor is a vital help in a time like this. One of the things we in my denomination (the [PCA](#)) could learn from our brothers in another related denomination (the PC-USA) is how they handle long-tenured pastorates: they actually require that an interim pastor be brought in for a season of time, and that season's length corresponds to how long the outgoing pastor had been there. This affords everyone-- the officers, the lay-leadership, the congregation, the community around the church-- an opportunity to proactively think and plan for how the church's ministry and community will be inherently different, and how to maintain continuity as well.

Objectively, the reasons for my friend's resignation weren't entirely the fault of the congregation or leadership. They offered to him particular reasons why they felt it wasn't working out, and asked for change and improvement in several concrete areas. Even here, however, these things cannot be taken at full face-value; because of the factors above, it is difficult to distinguish which of their reasons and concerns are the fruit of an impossible comparison to the former pastor, and which are objectively legitimate.

In the end, my friend didn't have a strong hope of lasting long at this church. As I said, he unintentionally became the interim pastor that they needed. Thankfully, he maintains his commitment to his call to ministry and intends to pursue another opportunity; sadly, I fear that too many men, otherwise well-qualified for pastoral ministry, would leave the ministry after an experience like this one.

The bottom line: churches and pastors alike would do quite well to be cautious in such situations and recognize the dangers of an unintentional interim. "