

SUCCESSION, TRANSITION, OR TRANSFORMATION?

“The median age of our congregation back in 1960, when my wife and I joined the church was about thirty-five years,” reflected the 61 year-old leader who chairs the pastor nominating committee at Westminster Church. “Today our median age is closer to sixty. Our pastor retired two months ago, and we’re looking for a young minister who can transform our church into a congregation filled with young families.”

I’ve been a member here for close to forty-years now, and I was shocked and disappointed when I heard our pastor was resigning after only six years here to take a call to a larger church,” complained a frustrated leader at Trinity Lutheran Church. “Pastor Hanson matches my ideal of the perfect minister. When Pastor Hanson came, we were still a small rural parish out on the edge of a metropolitan community. In only six years we have moved into what I call the second volume of our history.”

“The first volume was a series of chapters as a rural church. The first chapter of this second volume was the transition into a suburban role. That took about four years. We’re now an established suburban parish. Two-thirds of today’s members have joined during the past five years. I expect it will take at least fifteen or twenty-years before we are ready to move into our next chapter, whatever that may be. Our job is to find a successor who is comfortable with our new role. We need a successor who can come in, and, with a minimum degree of disruption, build on the foundation laid by Pastor Hanson. We don’t need any radical changes—we need community. We need a successor who can maintain the momentum built up by Pastor Hanson.”

During the fourteen years Pastor McKenzie was here, our congregation grew from an average worship attendance of about 135 to nearly 300. We’ve relocated to this seventeen-acre site. We’ve completed construction on a million-dollar first unit, and we’ve reduced our debt on that to less than \$100,000. Pastor McKenzie explained to us a couple of months ago that one reason for his resignation was to take a smaller church where he is the only minister on the staff. He declared he never had any ambitions to be the senior pastor of a mega church, but he is convinced we can triple in size within ten to fifteen years with the right ministerial leadership,” explained a young leader at Hope Church to a first-time visitor. We all hated to see him leave, but some of us recognize that this church probably has grown beyond the size he is comfortable with, and this may be the appropriate time for a change.”

“We need a new senior minister who can help us complete the transition from the neighborhood church we were for years to the regional church we are beginning to resemble. We invite you to come join us in making this transition. I’m thirty-five years old, and I expect by the time I’m fifty we’ll be a full-fledged regional church. That is quite a transition for folks like my parents, who were among the charter members when this congregation was founded back in 1958 as a walk-in neighborhood church.”

What is the point of commonality?

All three of these congregations are beginning the process of seeking a successor for a recently departed pastor. For many parishioners, this appears to be a period of threatening disruption.

From an institutional perspective, it may appear all three congregations share a common characteristic—a vacancy period during which that searches becomes the top priority. The differences, however, are greater than the similarities.

This can be illustrated by the “For Sale” signs in front of three single-family houses on the same street. The point of commonality is all three owners are seeking a buyer. A second point of commonality is all three houses were constructed in 1958.

One is for sale by a 69-year old widow whose husband died while working in the garden four months ago. She plans to move into a retirement home. A second is for sale by a 37-year old husband and his 35-year old wife who are beginning the process of a “friendly” divorce. She and their two children will be moving in with her parents for an indefinite period beginning next month.

The third house is for sale by an empty-nest couple in their late fifties. He just received an exceptionally generous early retirement offer from the company he started working for back in 1961. All three of their children are now happily married, healthy, financially comfortable, and producing grandchildren. This couple plans to move to North Carolina, travel, do volunteer work in a church they have yet to discover, travel, spoil their grandchildren, golf, travel, meet and make new friends, travel, and fully enjoy the next decade or two of life.

The “For Sale” signs could be identical, but the stories behind those signs vary greatly! Each of these three congregations is looking for a new pastor, but their needs vary greatly!

What Do They Need?

Westminster Church needs a transformational leader who can bring a vision of a new era, persuade the people to support that vision, and enlist three to seven of the most influential and widely respected volunteers to help turn that vision into reality.

After three decades of growing old together, it appears the time has come for Westminster Church to identify and reach a new constituency. The need is not simply for a “young-minister.” The need is for a visionary pastor with the skills of a transformational leader.

Those gifts and skills are as likely to be found in someone born in 1937 as in a person born in 1957. Unfortunately, both generations of pastors include a relatively small number of transformational leaders.

It appears that after only six years at Trinity Lutheran Church, Pastor Hanson left behind a living model of a vital, relevant, vibrant, and healthy parish with a strong ministry. The need here appears not to be for a skilled agent of planned change, but rather a successor who will bring continuity rather than disruption, affirmation rather than new ideas, who is comfortable building on the progress of the past, and who can maintain the momentum.

Hope Church needs a new pastor who can help people recognize that the future will not be even close to a carbon copy of yesterday, who brings a contagious future-orientation, who understands the culture of the large regional church, who is comfortable in the role of team leader in relating to both staff and volunteers, and who can lead this congregation in completing the transition from a neighborhood congregation into a regional church.

What Do They Look For?

Instead of focusing on the birth year of candidates as they seek for a young minister, the leaders at Westminster would be well advised to look for (a) the pastor who has been reaching substantial numbers of new members born after 1955 or (b) an ordained staff member in a large congregation who has been responsible for that church's package of ministries with families with young children, or (c) the pastor who ten or fifteen years ago came to a congregation that was growing older and smaller and helped transform it into reaching and serving a new constituency. Look at the track record, not the year of birth.

Trinity Lutheran may have the largest field of candidates as it seeks a new pastor who excels in working as part of a lay volunteer-staff team, who is comfortable giving credit to others, who is a productive worker, and who is both personally and professionally an exceptionally secure person. The need at Trinity is not for a brilliant superstar, but for a versatile pastor.

The logical place for the leaders at Hope Church is to begin their search is in the land of tomorrow, not yesterday. This usually means looking for an ordained staff member of a large regional congregation that averages at least 800 to 900 at worship.

Hope Church needs a leader who can affirm that new role by saying, "I've been there. While I've never served a congregation as small as Hope is today, I have spent seven years on the staff of a church that resembles what I believe God is calling this congregation to be tomorrow."

Hope Church does not need a new pastor who says, "While I have no firsthand knowledge of regional churches, I am eager to explore that unknown frontier with you."

Two Sets of Questions

These three examples illustrate two sets of questions. One set is for members of the search or pulpit committee.

1. What do we need? A successor for our departed pastor who can help us complete this chapter of our history? Or do we need a transformational leader who can help us move into a new chapter in our history? Or do we need someone who can help us complete the transition we have just begun?
2. Where do we begin to look for that type of pastor?
3. What would be the most useful questions we can ask of the candidates?

The second set of questions is for the pastor who is contemplating a move.

1. What are my gifts and skills? Will I be most effective in helping a congregation continue to write the chapter that was fully outlined by my predecessor and that appears to have many years to go before it is completed? Or am I the transformational leader who can bring a vision of a new tomorrow to a congregation and lead them in turning the dream into reality? Or am I best equipped to serve the congregation that has completed one chapter of its history and is now beginning to write the next chapter?
2. Who will help me come up with a realistic answer to those questions? My spouse? A trusted fellow pastor? Two or three of my current leaders? A counseling center? Interviews with search committees? A denominational staff member? A seminary professor?

3. If I am invited to come for an interview, what questions do I ask to (a) make sure the committee knows what that church needs, and (b) discover whether my gifts, skills, and experience match what they really need?

If your congregation is looking for a new pastor, do they need (1) a successor, (2) a transitional pastor, or (3) a transformational leader?

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