

# GETTING STARTED RIGHT

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OK, a new pastor is coming to be pastor of the congregation. Now, how do you help make the beginning a good one and establish from the start a culture of mutual caring? In consultation with the pastor and family, consider the following where appropriate.

**First**, does the family need to look for housing either for purchase or to rent? Help them identify a knowledgeable realtor. (A word of caution; it would be best if the realtor was not a member of the congregation in case the house shopping is not an easy task.)

**Second**, ask the pastor and family to identify some of the community locations in which they are interested. Offer them a good map already marked with significant institutions like hospitals, groceries, shopping sights, banks, drug stores, etc. Also, they may need suggestions with respect to identifying medical professionals for their family.

**Third**, if the pastor has small children, there will be times in the early weeks when it would be good to have some childcare provided so that the couple can do some of the initial exploration of the community. Identify some appropriate baby sitters and also connect them with a family with children of similar ages to those of the pastor's family.

**Fourth**, do they need help in making contacts with the local schools, recreational centers, etc.?

**Fifth**, consider identifying someone who can be effective in providing a good tour of the larger community. Actually two types of tours are important along with a marked map.

One is to help the family become oriented to the major parts of the community.

The second is for the pastor to become familiar with the social service agencies, significant churches, hospitals, etc. that will be important for his or her ministry.

In addition, introduce them to people that can provide insight regarding significant issues and concerns in the community. All communities have particular experiences in their history that affect their attitudes towards the larger society.

## THE CHURCH IS PART OF THE LARGER COMMUNITY

Consider scheduling a lunch about month after the new pastor arrives to begin his or her ministry. Invite to that lunch three to six pastors from the community. Depending on the community, this may be pastors of the same denomination or neighboring pastors of other denomination. Either choice has value for the incoming pastor. Try to have the lunch in a location where conversation can take place easily. The church can cater the lunch or find a restaurant that has a small room in which the lunch can take place.

When making the invitation to the other pastors, tell them that you want them to meet and share with your newly arrived pastor. Ask them to consider responding to some of the following topics during their lunch.

1. What are some of their major impressions of the community in which the church resides?
2. What are some of the most valuable resources and contact points that they have discovered are good resources for their ministry?

3. What are some of the gifts and strengths that they think the churches in the community offer? Included in that, what are these pastors impression of the strengths and gifts of the new pastor's congregation?
4. What are the areas of ministry that each pastor particularly finds satisfying in their own ministry?
5. What are some common ministries in which they have cooperated or might cooperate in the future?

All of this is designed to acquaint the new pastor with some significant clergy who might later be a source of support. By setting this up at the beginning, the congregation builds support for the incoming pastor and nurtures the possibility of some shared ministry in the community.

## **GETTING TO KNOW ALL ABOUT YOU**

A major challenge for not only the pastor but the pastor's family is how to get a sense of the congregation as a whole. Even if those responsible for the selection of the pastor have done their best to represent the congregation, they do not reflect the various opinions, ideas, and personalities that exist in any congregation. Some of this requires time for people to interact; however, there are some things that can help facilitate the process.

In coordination with the new pastor, a series of small group meetings across the congregation can be set for the first three or four months. Since there will be many other demands on both the pastor and family in the first months, it is probably best to space these meetings so that there is one or no more than two a week. Do it in homes, rather than the church, so that the pastor can become acquainted with where the people live. It is important that the pastor's spouse be present. To make this possible, arrange for childcare for the pastor's young children.

## **SHARING EXPECTATIONS**

The purpose of the meetings is both to meet each other and to begin to share expectations. To facilitate this, develop a set of four or five questions for use at all meetings. Some basic questions for members might be:

1. What is something that you are most proud of in the church's ministry?
2. What is one hope you have for the future of the congregation?
3. What is one thing about the congregation that you would like the pastor to know?
4. What is a change that you would support in the life of the congregation?
5. What is something you hope will not change?
6. What is one thing you expect from any pastor?

When the pastor has heard the majority of the congregation reflect on these or similar questions, s/he will have a pretty good sense of the challenge and promise of ministry in your church.

## **SPIRITUAL AND VOCATIONAL COVENANT**

The new pastor arrives, and s/he has been called to be a spiritual leader of this congregation. It is so easy to get weighed down by the practical issues of beginning a new pastorate—getting to know the people, understanding the traditions of the congregation, getting acquainted with the community, becoming familiar with the church programs— that the spiritual and vocational (God's unique calling for the church) focus of the congregation and pastor can fade into the background. Yet the future health of the congregation and the pastor may rest in these areas more than anywhere else. The first year is critical in setting the tone of the importance of the spiritual energy and the calling of God for the congregation. Below is a suggestion of how to keep alert to these areas.

After the first three months of the new pastorate, the new pastor should have a planning meeting with the congregational leadership. Ask both the official board and the pastor to consider what they sense might be five worthy spiritual goals for the congregation and three statements expressing where they think God might be calling this congregation.

The pastor will also be asked to share what s/he thinks might be a couple of personal spiritual goals and how, after the first three months, s/he understands God's calling to this congregation.

The numbers are arbitrary and might be more or less. The point is that after these first three months with each other, what are they perceiving? It also sets the tone from the beginning that the spiritual perspective is primary. The leadership and the pastor need to agree to meet near the end of the first year of their relationship and review their work and evaluate both the progress towards these goals and whether in light of their longer relationship they would make any changes.

The very decision to participate in this process elevates the importance of the spiritual and vocational aspect of their shared ministry. It also demonstrates support for the pastor to develop these areas.

## **A HEALTHY FIRST YEAR**

Any good pastor is going to work long hours, experience a continuing roller coaster of emotional situations, feel stressed by the inability to do everything, and feel guilty that at times his or her profession causes the family to suffer as well. Frustrations as well as exhilaration, compassion as well as anger, hope as well as despair, energy as well as exhaustion are just part of being a pastor. In that situation, there are both good and bad ways that the pastor can practice self-care, and there are ways that the congregation can exhibit support.

## **BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING**

From the beginning of this relationship, the leadership should communicate to the congregation in several ways that they have a goal of designing ways to support the new pastor and be good stewards of his or her physical, emotional, spiritual, and family health. Remind the congregation that a healthy pastor can provide healthy ministry.

Engage the members in being conscious of their ministry to the pastor even as the pastor has a ministry to them. Invite the members to submit suggestions about how the congregation can participate in creating this mutual support between pastor and congregation. Evaluate some of the ideas you receive and feed the best ideas back to the congregation.

At least quarterly the leadership should raise the question about how the pastor is taking care of himself or herself even as s/he offers ministry to others. By making the pastor aware that this is part of the quarterly agenda, you are building both expectation and support for the pastor engaging in self-care.

## **AN ATMOSPHERE OF CARE**

As the leadership of the congregation becomes intentional about the health of the pastor and family, the conversation should be expanded to include a Christian concern for the health of the entire congregation. The pastor is the spiritual leader for the whole congregation in which every member is called to recognize that his or her body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), and each are called to be good stewards of their personal bodies so that all can "glorify God in the body." Together, the pastor and congregation are to raise the challenge of how, in a stressful society, we live in a healthy manner. What you are doing is seeking an atmosphere of mutual care where all learn to love one another.

This is really the challenge faced by most people in our society. How do we embody in our living together Jesus' invitation in Matthews 11:28-30. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Wouldn't it be exciting for a whole congregation to focus on realizing that promise?