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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Finding God's New Call in the Same Place

Bill is fifty-five and has been at Fairdale Church for fifteen years. Ministry there has lost its shine. He resists routine pastoral visits and even preaching has become a chore. However, in the current job market, finding a new call that can provide the salary he needs to support kids in college is tough. He has been looking for a while without success, so feels stuck. Church participation is down and the board is worried.

Ann has been at Oakdale for four years now and is happy in ministry with the congregation. She is feeling comfortable in the role of pastor and has some successes to celebrate. Ann's husband has a job that he enjoys and their children are thriving in school. However, her seminary friends ask "What next?" She is ready for new challenges, but wonders what is best for the family and congregation.

First Presbyterian Church in Crossroads has experienced a revolving door of leadership for the past two decades. Pastors right out of seminary developed their ministry skills for a few years before moving on. Membership declined and lay leaders are discouraged.

Why Do We Feel Stuck?

Both pastors and congregations get stuck. Pastors who are burned out, geographically bound, or financially squeezed get stuck, as do congregations who are waiting for stable leadership or a pastor to leave. Pastors usually discern God's call to a new ministry without involving the congregation until the decision is made and a new call has been finalized. However, those decisions change the course of ministry for all involved. Research shows that clergy mobility affects congregational vitality.¹ When congregations focus on getting a pastor, developing a relationship with a pastor, or the loss of a pastor, less congregational energy is available for externally focused action such as evangelism and mission. Congregations without pastors, exhibiting "holding pattern" behavior, generally are less attractive to newcomers.

In the past, it was more common for a pastor to come to a community from seminary and remain for an entire ministry. Pastorates for twenty years or more were positively regarded. Now, pastors confide that they feel pressure to move on in order to be successful in their ministerial career. Accepted patterns of clergy mobility have established expectations of short first calls. In fact, the most effective years of a pastor's ministry come after five years in a congregation when relationships have been built and tested and a true shared ministry has been established.²

The Feeling Stuck Fallout

Both congregations and pastors often feel that the best solution to conflict is to part company. When that happens, neither learn from the relationship and do not develop skills to deal with differences without breaking relationship. Opportunities are missing for living forgiveness, reconciliation, resilience, and developing skills as Christian leaders. Rather than seizing opportunities for new ministries in response to God's call, congregations resist change, hoping that the pastor and his or her unsettling ideas will soon move on. Such congregations



"I KNOW YOU'RE EXPECTING A SHORT PASTORATE....
BUT, MUST WE LEAVE THE CAR RUNNING?"

become self-focused and stagnant while the pastor begins to feel the stress of being stuck.

A stressed pastor decides that the best solution is to seek a new call and move on. That brings added pressure to pastor and family with the activities of the search, decisions, and physical move. Furthermore, our culture teaches us to measure our value by salary and the size of the church we lead. This goal is likely unobtainable considering the current membership patterns of churches. In fact, researcher Patricia Chang found that a seminarian preparing for ministry today has a 1 percent chance of ever serving as Head-of-Staff of a large congregation.³ The long-established pattern of pastoral steeplechase is dead.

Internalized measures of success and worrying about a new call contribute to heightened stress, low self-esteem, and depression. Pastors feel stuck and do not do their best work—congregations and ministry languish. Often they look for the solution for “stuckness” in the mechanics of ministry—a new program, new leadership, or a new strategy. Yet the root issue is the loss of a sense of God’s call: the energy, passion, and focus that they experienced sometime in the past.

Finding a New Call

The Apostle Paul wrote to young Timothy, “Rekindle the gift of God that is within you” (2 Timothy 1:6). This is the secret to keeping vitality in ministry. Frederick Buechner tells us that to discover our call, we must look for the place “where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”⁴

Experienced pastors who have stayed with the same congregation for fifteen or more years are often able to describe a series of distinct calls in the same long-term ministry. Tom settled into the challenges of congregational life with worship leadership, pastoral visits, and church programming. Five years into ministry, he recognized that he got many requests from the community for pastoral counseling, which he enjoyed and was gifted at. The church board encouraged him to expand this outreach and supported him in continuing education to enhance his skills. Some years later, divisive social issues in his community drew Tom into a new leadership role. He understood this work as a new call in his long-term ministry. Rather than becoming stale, both he and the congregation gained new energy by discovering a series of new calls as he led them for thirty years before retiring.

As small congregations face dwindling resources, it is becoming common that they cannot continue to fully support their pastor. Recognizing that her congregation was nearing this situation, Mary used her continuing education and some time with a spiritual director to discern a new call. She agonized over the fact that she loves her congregation and her community and did not want to uproot her family. The suggestion that she was gifted in spiritual direction surprised her. Excited by the idea of a retreat ministry, Mary developed a business plan and talked with her church board. The board embraced the possibility of transitioning from full-time church employment to a bivocational ministry that would allow her to continue in the pastoral role and develop her blossoming new ministry.

By considering the activities that bring us joy and meet the needs of the world God loves, and building a ministry at that intersection, it is possible to discover a new call in the same place. Pastors and congregations are healthier when they are able to move from *stuck* to being *re-called* by rediscovering passion for ministry. By reshaping ministry in partnership with their congregation, it is possible for pastors to find the “sweet spot” of vital ministry and care for family. Consider these questions whenever you begin to get that stuck feeling in your current call.

- Think about times in your ministry work that bring you “deep gladness.” What were you doing and what gifts were you using?
- What deep needs of the world have come to your attention?
- How might you reshape your ministry to find deep gladness as you meet the needs of the world God loves?

About the Writer: The Rev. Dr. Marcia Clark Myers formerly directed the PC(USA)’s Office of Vocation and currently serves as a faculty member in the CREDO program, which focuses on pastoral renewal.

1. Cynthia Woolever, “When Less Is More; The Consequences of Clergy Turnover,” *The Parish Paper*, March 2014.

2. Roy M. Oswald, “The Pastor as Newcomer,” Alban Institute, 1998.

3. Patricia M. Y. Chang, *Factors Shaping Clergy Careers: A Wakeup Call for Protestant Denominations and Pastors*, Pulpit and Pew Research on Pastoral Leadership, 19.

4. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: HarperOne, 1993).