

Clergy Transition in Large and Very Large Congregations:

Following is a list of issues and questions to consider during the transition of senior clergy in very large and megachurches. These issues come from my experience in consulting on staff transitions with very large and megachurches across a number of denominations while on staff with The Alban Institute. They are not true in all cases but can provide some direction in thinking ahead and planning for transition.

1. Emotional space: The departing senior clergy must tell a strong and positive story about leaving the present church, including what waits and draws him/her on the other side of leaving or retirement. The congregation, staff and key leaders must feel glad for the pastor who is leaving or else their worries and concerns will follow the departing pastor and leave no space for emotional attachment to the new leader.
2. Anxiety lives at the center of very large congregations: Staff, board, and central leaders in the congregations carry the anxiety for the congregation during times of challenge or transition. As one moves from the center to the edges of the congregation anxiety morphs into interest. Staff and board at the center are worried about who the new leader will be and what changes will be made - at the edge of the congregation members and participants are merely interested in who the new leader will be. Unlike smaller churches, most of the work and communication during senior clergy transition has to be done only at the center with staff, board and key leaders. If this critical group of people manages their anxiety the congregation experiences minimal disruption. There is usually little work needed in the larger congregation during transition beyond the essential attention to continual communication after the announcement of the leaving of the senior pastor is public.
3. In very large and megachurches the bishop functions as the district superintendent providing the primary link to the denomination. An additional level of communication through the DS increases the anxiety of the church leaders about whether their messages are received and understood by the bishop.
4. One effective lever to manage anxiety in the church is to offer training to staff, board and central leaders on understanding the normal stages and issues of leadership transition. Tools and models of normative transition help leaders to recognize behavior and feelings as normal that might, otherwise, be of concern. If, in fact, the church leaders don't experience or witness some of the normative reactions described by the models it helps them to see themselves as managing the transition well and encourages them further. On-going external consultant support provided to the board and staff can make a significant difference in results.

5. Senior clergy of very large and megachurches, as well as long tenured founding pastors of a congregation naturally and appropriately carry and personify the identity and mission of the congregation. Their investment in the future of the congregation and their concern for releasing the identity of the church to another leader makes it more difficult for them to personally and spiritually let go and create open space for the new leader. The temptation is to want to embed their personal DNA in the congregation and the next senior leader. It may be important to provide support and accountability for the departing senior pastor to enable him/her to let go spiritually and institutionally in order to allow space for the new leader.
6. It may be helpful/necessary for the governing board to develop the process of leader selection and transition, informed by, but apart from the guidance and involvement of the current senior clergy.
 - a. The board, or some board-appointed task force might do the homework to identify the various models used by congregations for these transitions and to hear the stories of success and failures of the churches that have used the different models. There have been various strategies including:
 - i. calling/appointing a succession pastor to serve with the current senior clergy for a period of time before taking on the senior role;
 - ii. very short-tenured (at times only weeks or months) succession or co-leadership models designed to publically demonstrate the passing of the leadership mantle after which the departing senior clergy leaves quickly;
 - iii. use of search teams that do congregational, community and mission assessment, as well as setting the needs for future senior clergy leadership, without the direct involvement of the senior clergy; (The leaving senior clergy are fully interviewed by the search team to identify the concerns and ideas of the leaving leader, but then the search process continues without the further involvement of the departing clergy.)
 - iv. national denominational search and appointment processes managed collaboratively by the bishop, senior pastor and board / SPRC.
 - v. use of corporate search strategies and consultants.

The board can then take ownership of the process to be followed, which then empowers them and the staff to take more direct responsibility for the leadership transition that will follow.

- b. The use of interim clergy to manage the transition in very large and megachurches is not recommended because their presence tends to divert the attention and energy of staff and leaders. The result is a disruption of mission at a time when continued progress and energy is necessary. Lost momentum in large congregations is difficult to recapture.

- c. Normal denominational rules and practices of appointments do not serve these congregations well and should not be used. Denominational practices in all of our mainline denominations were designed for small to mid-size congregations. The bishop and appointment cabinet have to be prepared for charges of unfairness or preferential treatment from other clergy when working with very large and megachurch transitions.
7. Careful planning of senior leadership succession in very large and megachurches usually takes a significant amount of time during which strict confidentiality is required from the board and the appointment cabinet (if they are informed of the planning.) Premature announcement of the leaving of the senior clergy is anxiety producing and disruptive of mission.
 8. If the departing senior clergy remains in the community, very clear (and perhaps formal) agreements of personal and professional boundaries must be set and monitored, with accountability to the bishop. At no time must the incoming senior clergy be put in the position of having to initiate a complaint about the behavior or boundaries of the out-going senior pastor.

A final note: Most (almost all) of our mainline very large and megachurches were birthed after 1975. Because of the age of the founding clergy in these congregations we do not have a lot of experience with these transitions and, at the same time, are entering a time in which the number of such transitions on the horizon is growing quickly as retirements loom. I would encourage churches in this first wave of retirements and transitions, following the completion of their transition, to make a formal report and evaluation of the strategy and steps of transition available to bishops and other very large and megachurches who will follow.