

THE PASTOR AS NEWCOMER

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Resources for vital congregations

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The Alban Institute initiates discovery and learning to strengthen congregations in creative, faithful, and effective ministry in the world. The Alban Institute is an ecumenical and interfaith not-for-profit that strengthens congregations by conducting research on the most pressing and critical issues facing congregations; publishing resources; offering educational and training events; providing consulting services; and advocating for the role of congregations in their local communities. The Alban Institute is financed by revenues from fees for products, services, and memberships, by grants, and by contributions.

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The Pastor as Newcomer

Foreword

All too often when a pastor takes up a new assignment or call the same frustrating series of events occurs:

- everyone experiences a burst of enthusiasm and hope, with lay people and clergy finding that doors seem to open to new possibilities
- a few things go wrong, some hopes get dashed, personal differences emerge, old feuds erupt again, and a kind of disillusionment begins to take over
- gradually things get back to where they were, or worse, and the new pastor begins to have daydreams of greener pastures elsewhere.

We have been asking our colleagues and ourselves if this pattern is necessary. Is it inevitable that those hopes are dashed? Is it inevitable that clergy and lay people are victimized by such a self-defeating way of working together?

For many years, Roy Oswald has been asking these questions for the Alban Institute. This work has been made possible by a grant from the Wilks Fund of Morristown, N.J. A talented pastor (ELCA) himself, Roy has been continuing the pioneering work of the Metropolitan Ecumenical Training Center of Washington with new pastors, adapting it for research purposes and for broader studies. The methods as well as the specific learnings generated by the methods have become valuable resources for those who care about how pastors and congregations work. Under a grant from the Lilly Endowment, Roy has adapted those methods for use with pastors in the period immediately after their graduation from seminary, since we suspect that the first pastorate start-up may be particularly important.

It is our conviction that more creative use of those early months of starting up a pastorate will lead to more effective collaboration between clergy and laity. That conviction has been reinforced during the two years of our explorations, but perhaps a more important conviction has also been rediscovered and reaffirmed: that pastors and lay people have enormous resources of knowledge and experience to draw upon and that they can generate important knowledge for others by reflecting on that experience.

In this paper Roy Oswald has brought together many of these important learnings from the life and commitment of clergy and lay people who were willing to look critically at themselves and their work and to share what they saw.

Loren B. Mead
Founder and President Emeritus, The Alban Institute

Preface

The study of pastorate start-ups grew out of the Alban Institute's research on parishes in search of new pastoral leadership, initially suggested by Jack Harris. When I had the opportunity to become project director of this study, I discovered a whole wealth of information and insight on the dynamics of a "vacant" parish. I am grateful to Loren Mead, Celia Hahn, and Bill Yon for being my teachers in that regard.

By far the most exhilarating part of the study was meeting with Loren on a regular basis to work our way through the labyrinth of issues that needed to be solved in order for this study to get off the ground. We had no foundation grant to begin with. We needed to hoist the study off the ground on a "charge as we go" basis. When the Wilks Fund came through with an initial grant, it was like a life raft thrown to two tired swimmers.

Bill Weiser at Center I was very helpful at the beginning of the study. Bill had been doing "Pastor Changing Parishes" workshops for years prior to our study.

To my colleagues from the U.S. Army Chaplain's Board, who gave us the opportunity to interview lay persons regarding their views of pastorate start-ups, goes my deep appreciation, with special thanks to Ed Mouchette and Wendell Wright of that Board.

When the American Lutheran Church gave us a major contract to study start-ups with them, we knew we were underway. Lou Accola and Bill Behrens launched that project with us.

Finally, my thanks go to Tilden Edwards and the Metropolitan Ecumenical Training Center, who gave me my start in working with clergy in transition. METC has been doing seminars for clergy new to their congregations in the Washington area for ten years. I was able to head up that program when I came to work with METC.

And now, as we begin the second phase of our study on start-ups, the study of clergy transitions from a seminary culture to a parish culture, we are grateful to the Lilly Endowment for a substantial grant to complete that research.

Roy M. Oswald

Introduction

In 1975, the American Lutheran Church, a denomination of approximately three million parishioners and 4,200 active parish clergy, had 1,200 address changes among its clergy, and 950 actual position changes. Easily 20 percent of its full-time professionals moved in that year. The national staff of the ALC (which, since this writing, has become part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA]) anticipates a 20 percent turnover of its clergy and professional church workers annually.

With this statistic as a given, the denomination began asking, “What are we doing for both our congregations and our clergy to assist them in making these transitions?”

The ALC launched a major effort during 1976, with the help of the Alban Institute’s Pastorate Start Up Project, to learn more about transitions in their system and about how they can effectively support and assist those affected by this turnover.

Similarly, the U.S. Army Chaplain’s Board began taking a hard look at the fact that their chaplains are moved on the average of once every three years, some of them within an 18-month period. When the Chaplain’s Board heard about the Alban Institute’s Pastorate Start Up Project, they were eager to be included in the study. We have since conducted two research projects on chaplain start-ups, one at Fort Knox, Kentucky, and one at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

When we began this project in the late fall of 1975, we discovered a whole host of useful insights for how to begin a new ministry, as well as a lot of half-truths mixed with some downright self-defeating and unhelpful suggestions. In retrospect, we at the Institute are surprised that, prior to our study, more research had not been done in this area of ministry.

One of our basic assumptions in the project is that “the start-up period” (the first 12–18 months of a new pastorate) will determine to some degree the entire ministry of that clergy person in that congregation.” We hypothesize that within this start-up period, the patterns of interaction between clergy and congregation are set, the norms for how they are to live out their life together are established, and first impressions are solidified into lasting attitudes towards one another. In short, the marriage between clergy and congregation settles into predictable patterns of behavior and interaction. To date, we have not uncovered anything that would disprove this hypothesis.

The implication of this very basic assumption is staggering. If clergy move on the average of once every four years, then part of their being effective professionals in ministry is their ability to terminate in one parish and start up in another with a good deal of skill and insight. It is our experience to date that having skills in making transitions is not one most people (clergy included) would list as being

part of a clergy person's kit bag. Yet, when we perceive how traumatic and sometimes tragic these transitions are for clergy and their families, we see them as sheep led to the slaughter. For us in the research project this points up several real deficiencies within religious systems. In the first place, we have not discovered any training taking place within religious systems that equips clergy to deal with transitions. Not only do seminaries fail to provide them with skills and insights for effective transitions, but judicatory personnel also do not perceive clergy as needing much assistance during this period of time. It is almost expected that clergy and their families can cope with the hard knocks of transition on their own. As a result, most judicatory energy and money go into working with the vacant parish to see that a "right match" is made between clergy and congregation. Once the "fit" has been agreed upon, clergy are usually abandoned to make it on their own.

A second implication of our hypothesis that the first 12–18 months are the key months of ministry in a new parish is that clergy need help to get off on the "right foot." We have seen some clergy move into a new situation and do all the "right" things in the start-up period. Yet when we questioned them about their plan of ministry upon entering that situation, we discovered they had none. All the good and right things they did in their start-up were done by either intuition or luck. More than likely, they were doing things that worked well in past start-ups.

We have also observed some clergy who have engaged in many self-defeating patterns of behavior during this start-up period. With some undoing and redoing, plus a great deal of tolerance on the part of lay people, they may be able to work their way out of these corners. If these same clergy had had an opportunity to engage in some disciplined reflection on their past ministry and to test their plan of ministry for entering the new situation with some colleagues, these "poor starts" could have been avoided. There is no telling how many ministries could have been redemptive and helpful if they had only gotten off to a better start.

The start-up period, the first 18 months of a new ministry, technically begins on moving day. In order to understand the dynamics of start-ups, however, we are going to have to flash back to a period of time much earlier than this. From one perspective a start-up is the convergence of many histories into one time and place. The congregation has a history that, to a large extent, determines its behavior. The clergy person and his/her family also have a history that determines to some degree their behavior. Much can be garnered simply by studying these sets of history to see what can be predicted about the new relationship. For the moment, however, let's not go back that far. Of concern here is the immediate history of the parties being joined in ministry, and what termination emotions each is going through.

The congregation has just lost its former pastor and is struggling with the residue of feelings from that experience. More than likely these feelings and emotions have not been tended to, and so remain unresolved. As we continue researching this area, we are painfully reminded of how unskilled we are in assisting

congregations to deal with their corporate grief. In an attempt to get some handles on this dynamic within congregational life we have built on the work and writing of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. As such, we began looking for the stages of grief within congregations: denial, anger, guilt, bargaining, acceptance.

One of the reasons we have coined the phrase “termination emotions” is to have a term that is workable within congregation settings. A congregation may have had a terrible relationship with its former pastor. To begin talking with them about their grief would seem inappropriate; nevertheless, they are probably engaged in a good deal of anger and guilt which, if not resolved, will, continue to mess up the start-up process. A pastor skilled in the start-up process should be able to identify the marks of unresolved grief in the new parish.

The other piece of history that is important here is the termination of the pastor and his/her family from their last situation. The new parish may have experienced the leaving of its former pastor months ago, but a pastor and family in transition usually leave the former parish one week and begin in another parish the following week. Sometimes, if they are lucky, a vacation period is scheduled in between. But even in this case, the pastor and his family bring many unresolved feelings into the new situation.

Judicatories can assist their clergy in this period by thoroughly debriefing them, checking on the kinds of unresolved feelings clergy have on leaving their former parishes, and generally helping clergy disengage from their former situations. Once again, little work has been done to assist judicatories to be aware of the need for this process. What are some viable alternative models for terminating a ministry? What are the advantages and the costs of each? Which models are most helpful for assisting clergy to deal with their feelings?

The most popular model that we observe is the stoic one, which fits so well our “Denial of Death” society. It is best described by the work of the Lone Ranger of radio land who comes in, does good, then leaves alone in a cloud of dust before people can turn and thank the masked man for being so wonderful to them. This model shows clergy and their families arriving in their new parishes reeling from a whole mass of unresolved feelings. But the stoic model does not allow for an acknowledgement of these emotions, hence the attempt to muddle through as though nothing of importance had really occurred. We know, however, that emotions cannot be suppressed that easily. They are an important factor in the transitional period; they will probably emerge in unlikely places when least expected and can be the root cause of a very poor start-up. To quote Hugh Eichelberger in his case study on ministerial closure:

In my own personal experience, I do not think that I took seriously enough my own grief and did not locate adequate pastoral care for myself. The result of this was that I took some unresolved grief with me into my new work that had to be dealt with after the fact in an inappropriate context. Because I was moving to a new job that did

not include a manse, it was necessary for me to locate a house to buy in the area of my new work. This caused the movement of my family to be delayed for nearly two months. In retrospect I believe that the grief process would have been facilitated if my family had been able to move away from the community at the same time I began my new work. Because they were there I had occasion to be back in the community from time to time on the weekend and this was not only confusing for those who encountered me there, but it was also confusing for me. In looking back on the experience, I suspect my delay in relocating had something to do with a desire to hold on to the experience and a refusal to let go of that which had been particularly meaningful to me.

Hugh's experience is very similar to others we have met in the study thus far. Our findings are:

- a. Clergy usually underestimate the impact of termination on them personally and/or their families;
- b. They underestimate their need for pastoral care or a support system for themselves and their families during the transition. Good support systems do not happen by accident, and clergy usually do not put in the time in this start-up period to develop a good one for themselves. In a survey taken with clergy and lay professionals in the American Lutheran Church, most did not even think in terms of setting up a personal support system for themselves in the new situation.

There is another factor, important to pastorate start-ups, that occurs before the first day begins in the new parish; it is the whole calling process whereby congregations seek out and select a clergy person to be their pastor. In many ways this is similar to the courtship process that occurs before marriage. Congregation and clergy persons test each other to see if they like each other and if they might have a good future together.

No matter how much work has been done in a vacancy consultation in terms of self-study, goal setting, job descriptions, and so forth, the selection of a new pastor is not a rational decision. Hopefully, it will be semi-rational in that skills, interests, and expectations of the clergyperson closely approximate what the congregation needs. More than likely, the decision will be deeply intuitive with a good deal of blindness connected with it. In one sense, this is to be expected. As in courtship, there is always that sense of excitement about the relationship, coupled with the hope that things will be okay. Without this hope, couples or congregations and clergy might not ever engage each other. The most that can be hoped for is that they will do enough work together before cementing the contract to cut down on the number of surprises each will have once the relationship begins.

The role of a third party can be particularly helpful here. What premarital counseling is for marriage, so pre-calling consultation is to an actual call. The quality of the interaction in this pre-calling period will naturally affect the start-up period. The more judicatories can do to upgrade their process of vacancy and call procedure; the better off clergy and congregation will be in getting off to a good start. Of particular importance here is clarity around parsonage, housing, salary, fringe benefits, and vacation. It is difficult for a pastor to get off to a good start when he/she has to badger people constantly to resolve these issues.

Even though there is no neat sequence of events for pastorate start-ups, the following series of headings may be helpful:

1. Settling In

Getting settled in a new home and finding one's way around a new congregation can be exhausting and frustrating. Congregations vary in their involvement here. For the most part, we have discovered that congregational leaders are fairly conscientious in seeing to it that the pastor and his family's physical needs are met in this transitional period. Helping the family move in—stocking the refrigerator with food, showing the family around—may all be part of the welcome mat. In the questionnaires we have had laity fill out on this aspect of settling in, most feel their job is done when the new pastor is settled into the new house. There is usually very little awareness that he/she may have some emotional needs during this transition period, and that the family may have such needs. Grief work will probably have to be done outside the new congregation. References to the former parish will probably be tolerated only for a short while.

One item we discovered in our survey is how ill prepared clergy are for the process of moving from a parsonage to a house that they themselves have purchased. Most clergy had very little experience buying houses; some have found that was somewhat traumatic. There is need for a guide to be written for clergy in this regard, especially since the norm seems to be shifting from parsonages to clergy-owned residences.

2. Expectation of the Judicatory

Once clergy have been settled in to their new congregations, they often feel abandoned by their judicatory. Part of their loneliness stems from the pressure of the unexpressed expectations they see their judicatory has: they are expected to make things happen in this congregation. Judicatory officials who claim they have no expectations of the clergy person are, more than likely, not in touch with their own hidden expectations. It is also possible that these expectations have not been shared with the congregation. It is important for these expectations to be verbalized and for the judicatory's hidden agenda to be revealed and dealt with, so that they can function as a valuable source of support for clergy in a start-up. If

clergy expect to gain the respect and approval of their judicatory for the work they do, then at the outset of a new job in a new parish they should be clear with their judicatory as to what constitutes a good job.

3. Taking Our Histories Seriously

Normally, a parish profile consists of a lot of sociological and statistical data about a congregation. This information is helpful, but it does not tell the deeper story. There is a sense in which the history of the congregation will more accurately paint the picture for the present. In starting up a ministry in a new parish, it is our experience that paying attention to those portions of history that people remember and pass on is very important. In the first place, it gets clergy beyond the arrogant assumption that nothing of significance has happened in this parish until they arrived. Secondly, it puts them in touch with the hopes and expectations of the congregation. What we hope we will become usually grows out of where we have been.

One way for clergy to look at congregational history is as a great force that propels the parish into the future where, at most, good clergy interventions may do little more than slightly alter that course. In order to influence that direction, clergy first need to be aware of where the congregation is going. The force of this direction will usually grow out of:

- a. The congregation's beginnings
- b. The leaders or heroes that are remembered
- c. "Days of glory" that are recalled
- d. What is remembered about crises and turmoil
- e. The hopes and dreams that have accumulated over the years; usually closely associated with church buildings
- f. The families or individuals who were key to this history, some of whom are probably still around

Another way for clergy to look at congregational history is to track the spider webs in the church attic. To barge right in without sensitivity, however, is to emerge after several weeks in the midst of a lot of upset, annoyed people with spider webs all over one's face. The spider webs are the things that people hold sacred in a parish (usually differing within each parish). The surprise is in seeing what turns up as being sacred and what does not.

In taking history seriously, clergy may do a casual, informal search on their own, or they may engage some laity in a historicizing event. Joshua 24:1–27 speaks to this process; in working out the covenant between God and Israel, Joshua does a good bit of historical review. By recounting histories, he is able to get people to focus closely on the task at hand and the decisions that need to be made.

4. Eroded Self-Confidence

It is possible that either a new clergy person or the congregation or both have had their confidence severely shaken prior to their beginning together. Should this be the case, the kind of start-up that takes place can be seriously affected. For clergy, eroded confidence could result in bending over backwards to please everyone, becoming overly responsive to every whim and wish of parishioners despite the fact that these responses lead in different directions. It could also mean that these clergy have a high need for success in the new situation. They may prematurely push for success-oriented programs or for programs that have been sure winners for them in the past. Because these clergy are so anxious to succeed in their new place, they may be unable to perceive and use the data that is available to them to make sound judgments.

Congregations that have had their confidence seriously damaged by past events may move from a partnership stance in ministry to one of Savior and followers. Members may feel that nothing good can come from within them and that therefore they need a pastor to deliver them. According to John Fletcher in his Alban Institute paper titled *Religious Authenticity in the Clergy*, some congregations do not have the psychic strength to challenge a pastor at the points where he/she has failed or disappointed them. As a result, the relationship misses this opportunity to engage at a deeper level. Clergy and congregation may never work through their disappointments in each other and thereby miss the pathway to new opportunities for ministry.

Judicatory officials may be the key people who spot this phenomenon and make appropriate interventions. Clergy who are emerging from a devastating experience can be given skilled pastoral care during this period. A parish development consultant may need to be engaged for the congregation.

5. First Impressions

In our research on chaplain start-ups with the U.S. Army Chaplain's Board at both Fort Knox and Fort Bragg, some very clear evidence emerged that clergy need to take the first impressions parishioners have of them very seriously. This would be especially true of persons who see the pastor only occasionally or always from a distance. We found that some people made impulsive decisions about their new pastor:

- these decisions were based on data of their own choosing;
- they were based on some very limited tests;
- impressions ended up being rather permanent.

A large number of people came to some firm conclusions about their pastor based on the way they perceived him conducting his first worship service. To quote just two:

“I knew him to be a person filled with the Holy Spirit by the way he brought the message to us that first Sunday.”

“When he shook my hand and looked me in the eyes, I knew he had deep caring for me as a person.”

Out of 27 persons with whom we had hour-long interviews, eight said they had formed impressions of their chaplain within the first week. Over half said it took one month or less. When we interviewed chaplains, we found they were unaware both of how people went about testing their credibility and of the short length of time within which many laity form their impressions.

What piqued the curiosity of the research team was that people who made these snap judgments about the chaplain knew so little else about his program or his activities. We concluded that many of them had tunnel vision: they sought out only those clues or pieces of data that fit into their expectations of what a chaplain should be about. Those clues can be such simple things as:

- departing from one’s manuscript
- preaching from the Bible
- using certain words or phrases such as “praise the Lord,” “Blessed Jesus”
- a smile
- a happy disposition while doing parts of the service
- remembering parishioners when they met accidentally during the week

In the start-up period, some persons on the periphery of the congregation will probably be making snap judgments about the new pastor. How he is perceived may make the difference between these people sticking around to engage the pastor further or simply leaving, never to return. As impossible or frightening as this may seem, it is important to keep several things clear:

- a. People are looking hard to see whether their new clergy person is genuinely interested in them. They look for clues that communicate caring on the part of clergy.
- b. People are looking for authenticity: Is this new pastor a fully authentic human being? Has he/she got it together personally and theologically?

“Are you authentic?” and “Do you care?” are the two basic questions people ask. For some, a specific kind of theological orientation is called for—charismatic, liberal, conservative, fundamentalist. These folks will carefully watch the words clergy use in sermons and prayers, and on informal occasions. Clergy who are aware of being judged on a first impression may draw on the portions of their own religious experience that most closely approximate that of certain groups of people. They need to be careful, however, not to go outside their own core beliefs or value system. The danger here is in trying to please everyone. This practice carries the risk of coming across as inauthentic or as having no personal

convictions. This approach would, in the long run, be self-defeating in the first-impressions game.

6. Surprises

In the confusion and chaos of the first several weeks in a new parish, it is often difficult to know what to pay attention to. Data overload will probably be the major feeling—many people introducing themselves, dropping food by, providing many explanations.

We have found that a good way for clergy to monitor what is happening is to keep track of their surprises. “Surprises” is a key concept for understanding at which points expectations are in conflict. Reflecting upon the surprises in a pastorate start-up is a good way to clarify where and how communication signals got mis-sent or misheard. Clarifying or renegotiating expectations is a process, not an event.

7. Capitalizing on the Excitement of Transitions

Among all the other things we have said about start-up, there are some very powerful positive forces at work. The professional in ministry knows how to capitalize on the extra energy that is available at this juncture for use in the most crucial areas of that parish’s life. For example, the new minister usually has one or two “yeses” from everyone in the parish; when asked to do something, each member will probably say “yes” at least once. The key is to apply this extra “transition” energy and the *carte blanche* that is given during this period to the areas that are crucial to a viable future ministry in that congregation. This positive energy can be well applied to one or two of the destructive norms within that parish’s life. The mistake clergy often make here is to use up this energy and their political “vouchers” on some of their favorite programs to create an environment in their new parish that they are more comfortable with. It would, from our perspective, be a mistake for a new minister to use his “vouchers” on a change in the liturgy, for example, when it is clear the congregation has had a history of being in poor straits financially and will be in financial difficulty in the near future. (We don’t recommend making changes in the worship within the first six months.)

8. Making Changes

In our work with United Methodist Clergy in the Central New York Conference, we discovered at a start-up seminar that 14 out of 18 clergy said they made changes in the worship service upon arrival in their new parish. Some basic questions need to be raised about this practice.

- a. How do laity view the practice of every new clergy person's needing to do "his/her thing" in worship?
- b. What are the motivating factors behind this continued practice among clergy?
- c. In the face of congregational grief over the former pastor, is this a self-defeating practice on the part of clergy?

It is our sense of things that clergy need to be very careful about making changes in their new parish within the first 12 months, especially in worship. Several things get communicated when changes are made rather quickly:

- a. Laity get the sense that they are stupid when it comes to church life. In making a quick change, clergy are saying to laity, "I know how to do ministry—you don't. Henceforth we will do it my way." Changes in worship communicate: "I don't care what's been meaningful to you in the past, we are going to do the 'right' thing now."
- b. Lay people get the sense that the new clergy person has not come to take them and their needs seriously, but instead has arrived with program in hand.

To say categorically that no changes should be made within the first year would also be wrong. There are some changes that need to be made that a clear majority within the congregation will support. In fact, in some call situations the new minister is given the mandate to make bold changes right from the start.

The job of the new minister is to be clear that the change is needed, wanted, and supported—to avoid being taken in by one faction of the congregation that pushes for change when the majority resists. The minister needs also to distinguish between those changes which affect program or worship and those changes which affect the norms and practices within the parish that are crucial to its continued health and life (see the point on capitalizing on excitement). This latter sort of change, in which the aid and support of laity are enlisted to get at the issues that seem to be dragging the parish down, will most likely result in a major thrust or special emphasis on some particular problem rather than in changes in programs. Some examples are:

- increasing church attendance
- increasing church giving
- building unity
- resolving a major conflict issue
- dealing with cynicism or a sense of despair
- building towards a more positive self-image
- leadership development
- building repair and/or maintenance

Several other points around making changes are:

- a. Adding something is less risky than substituting something. In the latter case,

- one really does communicate that laity know nothing about ministry; and in the former case, one risks that laity will feel the new minister is more interested in doing his/her thing than in supporting what they are invested in.
- b. If the former pastor was dearly loved by the congregation, any changes—especially those in worship—become a symbolic reminder of his absence. Changes in worship are a weekly reminder that Dear Rev. _____ is no longer with us.

9. The Shadow/Ghost of the Former Pastor

One way congregations move through the grief process, it appears, is by talking about the previous pastor. The new pastor may have heard the same stories over and over again: it seems necessary that he/she continue to listen so people can work their feelings through. The ability to avoid being threatened by all the positive comments about the previous pastor and to avoid being judgmental about the negative information is the key to the newcomer's being able to facilitate the process (and finally be accepted as the new pastor). To view the praise of the former pastor as a sign that certain parishioners are rejecting the newcomer is to wrongly interpret what is taking place.

A real advantage of being in touch with the history of a congregation is that one knows which previous pastors are still considered the saints of the past. Quite possibly, a congregation is still grieving for a pastor who served them several pastorates ago. This complicates the picture when exploring congregational feelings about the immediate predecessor. The incoming pastor needs to walk slowly here, maybe in a slight crouch, to avoid the spider webs spun by former clergy. With careful research and time a new pastor knows exactly where these webs are—although occasionally he may still find web on his face.

The general consensus seems to be that it is easier to follow a good pastoral experience than a poor one. In our work with army chaplains, we came upon the term “borrowed credit.” Borrowed credit refers to the positive feelings parishioners naturally accrue to the new pastor because they have had positive experiences with past clergy. If the immediate past pastor was loved, trusted, and respected, once the congregation has worked out its grief in losing him/her, then these parishioners will expect to have the same feelings about the incoming pastor.

When experience with the past clergy has been negative, the new pastor may discover that he/she has unequivocal acceptance at the start-up—as one clergyman put it, “It was as though I could do no wrong,”—but in the long run these clergy need to contend with the “inherited debt” from former clergy. If, for example, the former pastor had his hand in the Sunday offering occasionally, parishioners will, for a long time, be watching out of the corners of their eyes to see whether the new pastor will try the same thing. Similarly, if parishioners have been betrayed, disappointed, let down, abused, or lied to by former clergy, the

new pastor, no matter how popular, may have to contend with parishioners occasionally wondering whether all clergy are alike. Extra caution needs to be exercised in areas where laity have been abused or disappointed. Clergy may find they are being tested around these specific areas.

10. Laity Testing of New Clergy

In our interviews with congregational members at both Fort Bragg and Fort Knox, one question really hit pay dirt: “How do members of this parish go about testing whether a new chaplain can be trusted with the deeper issues of their lives?”

When we asked this question of chaplains, we discovered they were either unclear about how laypersons did this or were unaware of it even happening. When we asked parishioners this question, we uncovered a whole raft of ways they see their fellows testing new clergy. For example, people said, “We wait to see whether what he preaches coincides with the way he lives.”

- The first people that come in are test cases. The word of good results spreads fast after that.
- Sometimes a congregation sends its sickest members to a new chaplain. It then waits to see how they are handled—whether the chaplain gets sucked in and loses perspective.
- People approach a chaplain informally and ask him about some minor problems. Judging how he deals with those problems will determine whether they will go deeper with him.
- People watch how the chaplain reacts to children. “I guess there is a little child within each of us.” “We watch how his humanity shows through in his sermons and how he conducts worship.” “What a chaplain stresses with people tells what he is ready to deal with as a person.”
- Does a chaplain find out what’s going on?
- How a chaplain shakes hands and listens to what you are saying—does he really pay attention to you or is his mind somewhere else?
- Accessibility—if you leave word, does he make an effort to get back to you soon?
- In informal discussions, it is often how he gives his opinion, not what he actually says.

These data raise some serious questions about the so-called “honeymoon” period in pastorate start-ups. Talk about the “honeymoon” period in this situation is confusing. Are people talking about the time in which parish and pastor live together harmoniously because they are living out of their projections and hopes? Or are they talking about the time in which each withholds honest feedback from the other? It is almost as though there are two phases to the honeymoon period. The first is a relatively short period of time, one to four weeks, in which each

functions out of unreal data about the other. There is a sense in which new objects are overvalued (ministers, babies, a new spouse). We project onto the other our hopes and dreams of what we would like him/her to be. In pastorate start-ups, the clay feet of both the pastor and parish are exposed very quickly. We discovered, in our research with the Army Chaplain's Board, that people need a minimum of two contacts to arrive at a realistic assessment of the new chaplain.

During the second honeymoon period, people withhold their candor from the new clergyperson. It is as though parishioners contract with one another to suspend judgment until the new minister is given a fair chance, or until they have an opportunity to get to know him/her better. On the surface it seems as though everything is going well. Clergy can fall into the trap and construe this seeming harmony as approval for what they are doing. In this sense, congregations give new clergy enough rope to hang themselves. Some clergy continue to "do their thing," assuming the parish will tell them if they disapprove. They alienate themselves from some and lose the confidence of others. When the period of testing is over, they have come up with a poor grade.

There are two sides to every relationship, and clergy do their own testing of the congregations they serve. They, too, will soon discover that the new congregation is not everything it was cracked up to be. Some clergy may seek opportunities to talk about their sense of being deceived or disappointed. They often need to wait until the congregation is ready to hear. As one Disciples of Christ minister put it, "it was almost as though I had to wait until a prescribed period of time was over before people would listen to my frustration and disappointment. They could only hear me when they were ready to talk about my shortcomings as well." It is as though there is an unwritten agreement as to a period of time within which clergy and congregation withhold their honesty from each other.

11. When the "Honeymoon" Is Over

Even though this period of testing can hardly be called a honeymoon, we use the term because that is what it has been called traditionally. When, by some internal calendar, parishioners feel the honeymoon has ended and it is time to get down to the business of living together in reality and in truth, a creative opportunity is present. When people and pastor begin to unload their deeper feelings towards each other, it is a frightening time, to say the least. Clergy who find this too threatening to deal with either take refuge in their role as pastor or avoid the confrontation by launching into new success-oriented programs. Hopefully, pastor and people can hang in there with each other to renegotiate the conditions under which they will begin again to live out their corporate life. An attempt on the part of either clergy or congregation to force the other back into the original contract, set at the time of the call, is to be avoided.¹ That contract was probably made on the basis of much misinformation about each other.²

12. Shifts in Congregational Power Dynamics

The shifts in power that occur when a new pastor arrives should be monitored. More than likely, those in positions of power are there relative to the former pastor (either in support or opposition). We can think of there being two congregations, (A) and (B), within each parish. (A) is that small group of people, approximately ten to twenty percent of the congregation, who contribute upwards of fifty to sixty percent of the total church budget and who provide leadership for most of the key functions within the parish. (B) is that much larger group who are on the periphery of the congregation in terms of leadership and giving, but who still consider themselves active parishioners. With a pastoral change there are usually some people who move from (A) to (B) and others who move from (B) to (A). The new group (A) will probably reflect more closely the new pastor's age, thinking, lifestyle, theology, and mode of operation. These shifts will occur as a normal course of events, but the new pastor does have the option of being more intentional about the kinds of shifts that occur. He/she needs to answer such important questions as:

“What kinds of people need to be empowered in this congregation?” “What kind of power do I need in order to be effective in this congregation?” (Power here is related to the new pastor's credibility with those already holding power.) “How does the current power structure reflect the variety of people and needs within the parish?”

13. The First Conflict

The new pastor should, if possible, check out whether the new parish has an immediate conflict that will need to be resolved upon arrival. It is very easy to get sucked into a major conflict when starting up a new ministry as parishioners often hold off on a resolution of differences until the new pastor arrives. Judicatory officials or persons assisting in the call process may be helpful here. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.

If a conflict does exist and tensions are running high, the new pastor will need a careful plan for dealing with the internal strife, and will need to be aware that siding with one faction over another will reduce credibility.

Hopefully, there will be an opportunity to develop some trust and credibility with the entire congregation before moving into resolution. If that is not possible, the pastor's credibility will ride on how she/he deals with that first conflict situation.

The kinds of norms that get set at the time of dealing with the first conflict are of great importance. People watch closely how the new pastor deals with the first conflict. This is not to say that the pastor sets the norms, but that, from his/her example, the congregation establishes their expectations for how the pastor will deal with future conflicts. This determines, to some extent, the risks they will take

and the kinds of expectations they will have about changing conflict norm in the parish.

Once again, the new pastor can be more intentional about changing the conflict norms within the parish when he/she is aware of the importance of how the first conflict is dealt with.

14. Leadership Styles

An analysis of the leadership style of both the past and the present clergyperson can give insight into disappointments and conflicts that may arise around leadership issues. Congregations seem to develop a corporate expectation for the kind of leadership they want from a pastor. Should the new pastor's leadership style differ significantly from this, conflict can be expected.

Clergy often live with the notion that changing laity's expectations of pastoral leadership style is a good thing. A new pastor who sees changing the parish into a more democratic institution as part of his/her ministry is a good example of this. The pastor's effort may be based on a notion that, from a theological perspective, there are good and bad styles of pastoral leadership. We, from our perspective in this project, find neither Biblical nor theological support for one style of leadership or another. It is our viewpoint that when, in a start-up situation, clergy consciously try to change pastoral leadership expectations within the parish, they are attempting to create a parish that is more to their own personal liking. For us, this raises the ethical question of whether laity should be expected to change their leadership needs to suit the personal preference of clergy.

Several years ago Robert Tannenbaum and Warren Schmidt studied which styles of leadership are most effective.³ They discovered that no one style emerged as being better than another and that the most effective leaders were those who could most closely match the leadership expectations of those being led.

What these learnings seem to call for is the ability of new clergy to approximate closely the leadership expectations of their new parishes. Their style may be based on that of the previous minister, but not always. The previous minister may have sorely disappointed the parish with his style of leadership. Clergy new to their congregations need to discover what the majority of parishioners expect in this area. To be sure, they need not attempt to imitate a style that is foreign to them. They can, however, explore the breadth and depth of their own leadership capacity to see whether they can legitimately offer to the new parish a style that approximates what is expected.

A second option is to talk about this issue with lay leaders after the first year to see whether any differences between what is offered and what is expected can be negotiated to a workable compromise.

One last thought on leadership styles. Lyle Schaller has a theory that every organization has both an administrator and a lover: one to run the organization and keep it moving, the other to bind up the wounds of the members and take care of their affiliation needs. In a parish setting these roles usually reside in the pastor and the parish secretary. If the pastor is the lover, then the parish secretary keeps the parish together administratively. When the pastor is a good administrator, it is usually the parish secretary who gets the long phone calls for support, sympathy, and understanding.

In a pastoral change this may imply role competition between the pastor and the secretary if the new clergyperson is the exact opposite of the former in this regard. When such competition occurs it is not unusual for the new pastor to declare promptly: “Either she goes or I go.”

This theory by Dr. Schaller may be helpful to clergy and congregations as they move into a pastoral change. An analysis of the styles of both pastor and parish secretary can lead to the prevention of some difficulty down the line—or at least prepare congregational leaders for the trouble that is ahead.

Notes

1. Based on our experience with this process we do not recommend that congregations attempt to establish a contract with their new pastor at the time of the call. At most, there should be a contract that they will, together, write a contract sometime after the first 12 months of ministry together.
2. We highly recommend the process called “Planned Re-Negotiation” for this time in the start-up. See John J. Sherwood and John C. Glidewell, “Planned Re-Negotiation: A Norm-setting OD Intervention” (*The 1973 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators*).
3. Robert Tannenbaum and Warren Schmidt, “How to Choose a Leadership Pattern,” *Harvard Business Review* (March-April 1956).