
LEADERSHIP TRANSITION

Focus

Leadership transitions provide many opportunities for organizations, churches, and denominations to reassess their identity and evaluate the way they function. A time of leadership transition is also an invitation to engage in a variety of emotions at a personal as well as a corporate level. There are feelings of grief as one leader leaves and feelings of excitement and expectation as a new leader arrives. There can also be feelings of anxiety and disorientation. The “in-between time” of leadership transition can be a rich time of listening, trusting, and working with God for a new thing to emerge.

Some Centering Quotes about Leadership Transition

“Transition is not just a nice way to say change. It is the inner process through which people come to terms with a change, as they let go of the way things used to be and reorient themselves to the way that things are now. In an organization, managing transition means helping people to make that difficult process less painful and disruptive.”

(William Bridges, *Transition as the Way Through*)

Between periods of industry, productivity, and growth lay fallow spaces; spaces where untapped potential is lying wait. In liminal seasons there is a body of work to be done, but it is not problem-solving work. We often avoid the work of liminal space because it feels passive, and at times non-productive. So, we substitute hard work and busyness. Unfortunately, when we focus on the wrong work in a liminal season we contribute to our own exhaustion and inability to move forward.”

(Susan Beaumont, *Embracing Liminal Space*)

The Contract

A word from the led

And in the end we follow them—
 not because we are paid,
 not because we might see some advantage,
 not because of the things they have accomplished,
 not even because of the dreams they dream,
 but simply because of who they are—
 the man, the woman, the leader, the boss,
 standing up there when the wave hits the rock,
 passing out faith and confidence like life jackets,
 knowing the currents, holding the doubts,
 imagining the delights and terrors of every landfall:

captain, pirate, and parent by turns,
the bearer of our countless hopes and expectations.
We give them our trust. We give them our effort.
What we ask in return is that they stay true.

(William Ayot)

A Personal Testimony About Leadership Transition

A hypothetical story of church leadership transition based on *Getting Them Through the Wilderness*, by William Bridges

The beloved pastor of High Valley Community Church decided to retire after 20 years of ministry at that church. There was a great sending off party to celebrate the pastor's faithfulness and hard work at the church.

After six months of a pastoral vacancy a new settled pastor was finally called. There was great excitement about the new pastor. Upon arrival, the new pastor got to work meeting with the Board and holding an all church retreat to announce a total reorganization of the church's structure and new policies for leaders in the church. The new pastor was confident that all these changes would make the church grow and operate more efficiently.

Three months into this new plan, the pastor realized that what seemed to be a friendly, conflict free congregation now seemed anxious and suspicious. There were rumors about someone suing the church because the new leadership requirements put them out of a job at the church. Ministries that were once vibrant were being cancelled because of lack of interest. There was a decline in worship.

The pastor called in a consultant who specialized in leadership transitions to ask for help and determine what to do. The consultant pointed out that while the pastor had planned the organization's changes with great reason and enthusiasm, people's transitions were forgotten. There had not been enough focus and attention given to a natural process of letting go of who they were in relationship to the previous pastor, spending some time regrouping for a new pastor, and beginning over again with a new purpose and sense of themselves in relation to the new pastor.

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Leadership Transition

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Have you ever been part of a leadership transition as either the leader or the one being led? What are things you would do differently? What are things you would do the same?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What word or phrase from the centering quotes stood out for you? Why?

Additional Thoughts

Leadership transitions are a natural part of the life of any group, organization, nation or country. It is rare that a leadership change happens in an instant. Even though one leader may be gone and another put in place, these transitions take time as relationships change, grief occurs over what has been, and uncertainty looms about what will be.

In the past several years, MCC has become very intentional about providing training and assisting our churches in pastoral transitions. We have learned the importance of preparing our churches to welcome a new settled pastor. Typically small to medium size congregations work with five developmental tasks when making such a leadership transition:

1. Coming to terms with the history of the congregation.
2. Discovering a new identity.
3. Managing necessary leadership changes in lay leadership and on the staff team.
4. Renewing denominational linkages.
5. Gaining commitment to new directions in ministry.

Susan Beaumont, has pointed out that these tasks might look different in larger congregations. She claims that congregants in small to medium size congregations make leadership transitions by letting go of personal attachment to the pastor, while in a larger church those personal attachments exist more between pastor and staff and key lay leaders. She revises the five developmental tasks for larger congregations to be:

1. Aligning and renewing congregational mission and vision.
2. Discerning and articulating the strategic priorities for the next chapter.
3. Improving stability at the core by strengthening staff team dynamics and governance practices.
4. Managing necessary changes in leadership roles while maintaining leadership stability and momentum.
5. Creating a good ending, honoring the neutral zone (or liminal space), and preparing for a new beginning.

But what about denominations? How do large organizations navigate a change in leadership? In the booklet, *Getting Them Through the Wilderness*, William Bridges points out that transition is different from change. Change is situational, while transition is a three-phase process through which people gradually accept the details of the new situation and the changes that come with it. These three phases are:

1. An ending—people let go of their old reality and their old identity;
2. A neutral zone—people go dormant for a while as they prepare to move out in a new direction. This can be a dangerous time for organizations but also a creative time.
3. Beginning over again with a new sense of purpose and energy.

While endings and beginnings are obvious steps in leadership transitions, the neutral zone, or what Susan Beaumont has called 'liminal space' is not so familiar. Liminal space is not 'dead space' or time to take a break. It is space that calls for a different kind of energy, a space that invites a deeper trust in God and each other, sometimes an uncomfortable space, but a necessary space.

Beaumont writes: “A liminal season is a time to nurture the soul of a congregation by clarifying basic vocational questions: Who are we? Who are we here to serve? What is God calling us to do or become? It is a time to nurture and develop the discernment muscles of the leadership body. In a liminal season, we strengthen the leadership narrative of the congregation, along with systems for communication, decision making and conflict management. It is a time to work through any unresolved grief or shame issues that bind the congregation. And finally, it is a season to reflect upon behavioral norms and practices that might prevent new leadership from entering well.

The large church does not halt activity to tend to its liminal work; it builds the bridge to the next chapter while walking on the bridge. Typically the momentum of the congregation is maintained by the staff team, the governing board, and ministry teams while pockets of leadership pause to engage the liminal work. Consequently, stability within the staff team and among the lay leaders is critical. So is developing a rhythm of work and rest.”

Biblical Passages About Diversity & Imago Dei

Moses to Joshua – Deuteronomy 31:1-23
Elijah to Elisha – 2 Kings 2

Samuel to Saul – 1 Samuel 8-10:1
Jesus to the Disciples – John 15-16

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Point of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): How have you experienced a ‘liminal season’ in your personal life, or the life of a group or congregation you have been a part of?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): How might MCC make the three-phase transitional journey William Bridges outlines?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): Do you agree that the same principles Beaumont outlines for leadership transitions in larger congregations would also apply to a denomination? Why or why not? What principles would you add?

Pulling it All Together: Ritual

Invite people to stand, as they are able in a circle and teach them the following song (you can sing acapella or have someone play the tune on the piano). After people become familiar with the tune, put arm motions to the song. Every time the people sing 'let go' invite them to move their hands and arms from the center of their chest out into the center of the circle. Every time the people sing 'come in' invite them to scoop the air in front of them into their chest with their hands and arms. Sing through the song with the body motions several times. Inviting people to prayerfully consider what they need to let go of and what they need to welcome during this time of leadership transition in MCC.

Let Go, Come In

Joyce Rupp

Let _ go, let _ go, let _ go some more;
Come in, come in, come in some more;

let _ go of ev' ry thing. God is all.
come in, I wel come you. God is all.

Additional Resources

Susan Beaumont, *Passing the Mantle: The Interim Time Period in the Large Congregation*, www.susanbeaumont.com

William Bridges, *Getting Them Through the Wilderness*, www.williambridges.com

Loren B. Mead, *A Change of Pastors*, Alban Institute, 2005

Roger S. Nicholson, ed., *Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry*, Alban Institute, 1998

Roy M. Oswald, James M. Heath and Ann W. Heath, *Beginning Ministry Together: The Alban Handbook for Clergy Transitions*, Alban Institute, 2003