

A Change of Pastors by Loren Mead

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The Terrain and the Climate of the Journey

The chart at the end of chapter 2 (p. 18) underlies this chapter and its predecessor. Chapter 3 describes the sequential steps of the task ahead. In this chapter I will be focused on the nonsequential developmental tasks, the processes that need to happen during the journey. Chapter 3 describes the horizontal journey; this chapter describes the vertical journey.

Here the focus will be on the five developmental tasks congregations will not always do, or at least will not always do well. The procedures, the sequential steps, have to happen, but these tasks do not. If they are not done, however, it will affect enormously the quality of the ministry that comes out at the other end. Now I want to show how those steps form a framework within which the developmental tasks can happen.

Here, then, are brief descriptions of the five tasks that are central to bringing about the kind of new relationship between pastor and people that Al Shepherdson's congregation and yours want to foster.

The First Developmental Task: Coming to Terms with the Past

Every congregation lives in dialogue with its past. Every congregation is strengthened immeasurably by its history, but

every congregation has also been deeply wounded by its past. It is both the heir and the victim of its story.

Congregations are not blank slates simply waiting for a new pastor to write a totally new story. A pastor sometimes is confused by resistance to what he or she plans to do in “their” congregation. The congregation is a living, breathing cauldron of ministry and story and mission and tragedy. It is not waiting for the pastor to bring life—life is already there and they are living a ministry that was there before their recent pastor and it will be there when the new pastor is long gone.

There are two extremes I’ve observed in pastor placement—extremes I think to be pathological, extremes I think the entire search process is intended to help us escape.

At one end of this scale the pastoral placement is a hostile takeover. The pastoral candidate has such a strong commitment (to a management style, to a theological approach, to an understanding of religious community) that he or she comes in to wipe out the past and start all over. In such a placement the new pastor often flushes out all remnants of the previous patterns of the congregation and imposes his or her own imprint upon it. The past is eliminated. Usually many members of the congregation leave—sometimes immediately, in other cases over a year or two. (Healthier congregations throw the fool out!)

I see such an outcome as badly flawed. It comes from the assumption that the pastor “owns” the ministry and “is” the ministry. It assumes that the people of the congregation are not intrinsic to the ministry. (I remember an Army chaplain’s comment when I asked him how he managed to move to a new place and initiate a new work every three years, which was then the standard in the chaplaincy: “Easy—I assume they never had ministry until I got there.”) All too many clergy I know have assumptions not unlike those that the chaplain

stated so baldly. Few state it that bluntly, but many clergy do feel that temptation, and some succumb to it.

One thing about this extreme of leadership—it is full of conflict and anger. And it usually generates more of both in the congregation. This approach tends to see history as the enemy, and all previous ideas of ministry as suspect, deserving only to be rooted out. I see the past of the congregation, on the other hand, as often flawed but as an enormous repository of experience, wisdom, and ministry that can become a ground upon which a new ministry can be built by clergy and laity.

At the other end of the scale the new pastor goes native—that is, “fits in,” accepting all aspects of the congregation and community culture, so afraid of making a difference that he or she is concerned only not to rock any boats. In this case, the past is not eliminated; rather, the past rules over the future. The new pastor abdicates his or her special gifts for this place and simply becomes an inert piece of furniture that doesn’t get in the way of congregational life continuing just as it has been in the past.

I see ministry as the heart of the congregation’s life—a communal reality and a historical reality. It comes into being there in a particular group of people and in a particular context. It reflects the special gifts and weaknesses of a particular group of people and the story of their community of faith. It has been built in a dialogue in which many laity and a number of clergy have had roles and given their gifts. It is a building in which there have been all sorts of architects and carpenters, planners and painters, workers and dreamers, cooks and bottle washers.

And in my experience clergy have brought many differing gifts and differing resources to those congregations. Those gifts and resources are included in that history, even though

those clergy may be long gone. The way we “do” congregation nowadays, it is the energy that comes from the live connection between laity and clergy that generates much life in the congregation and leads it to new places. When the clergy simply go native, they leave behind the special perspective and gifts they have for the community and its ministry, and much of the energy for new life evaporates. When clergy cease to bring any outside perspective and gifts to the congregation, they abdicate their ability to contribute to the life of the congregation.

The other side of this extreme is that it tends to be very, very peaceful. People may ignore this kind of ministry, but they probably will not fight it.

The first developmental task, coming to terms with the past, opts against these two extremes. It means taking the time to mine the successes and failures of the past and from them build a foundation for new maturity. Coming to terms with the past means the congregation comes to a place where it is able to look at its past, lay to rest its ghosts, value its heroes and heroines, honor its special story, forgive itself for its faults, and gain energy for a new stage of its journey.

I frequently think of my work as a pastor or as a consultant as that of “exorcising demons.” Not in the way the movie *The Exorcist* exploited, but in the mundane work of helping people gain power over irrational fears and influences that past experience or people have over them. At times of pastoral change we often discover giants (some good ones and some bad ones) of clergy or lay leaders who cast a long shadow over the way things are done in the congregation. Just as there are great persons and great leaders who cast a long shadow, there are people who leave negative or hurtful marks in a congregation. Particularly when there has been misbehavior that leads to departure (a pastor who engages in sexual misbehavior; a clergy or lay leader who misappropriates funds; an employee

who has to be fired; a pastor accused of plagiarism) the pain is often exacerbated by a cloak of secrecy—some people in the congregation are “in the know” and many others are “in the dark.” Such memories leave a lot of pain behind.

Emotions we have about pastors are often highly charged. Pastors trigger feelings—good and bad—in those they work with in a congregation. Remembering experiences with past pastors is quite likely to touch levels of people’s lives that are not touched by anyone other than a family member, parent, or sibling. Losing a pastor can be a hard emotional blow, triggering all the emotions of grief—it is not strictly a rational exercise. The emotions one associates with grief are likely to be present in the congregation that is losing its pastor—unreasonable anger, debilitating depression, simple denial, bargaining, and, with luck, acceptance flowing through congregation members—in different proportions and at different times. These are emotional responses to the loss of the pastor, not rational states that can be reasoned with or explained. People simply will get angry about ordinary glitches: a meeting that is not run well; an “ordinary” goof-up on an announcement list; an overlooked thank-you note. People will lose energy unexpectedly or even stop going to church in a sort of depression over the loss of the pastor. Others will simply ignore the whole thing, hoping it will either go away or get solved without disturbing anything. Others who loved the last pastor will vie to see if a new one exactly like the last one can somehow be chosen.

Contrariwise, those who did not like the last pastor will try to get an exact opposite person! Many of these are emotional responses, and it is the task of the congregation’s leaders and search committee to allow time and discussion so these things can be worked through, not “answered.” These emotional states will recycle themselves until the emotional gunpowder is used up. In time those emotions will move to

the back burners as there is growing acceptance of the loss accompanied by growing anticipation of the next stage of history. (That's what we mean by "coming to terms with history"!)

Because this book deals with a change of pastoral leadership and the leaving of one pastor, the focus here is on the special dynamics of that pastoral role. But there are other important dimensions of history that need to be brought into the conversation.

There are the *things* of the congregation—its buildings, the special memorials, its location, and how the story of how the physical plant was assembled. Talking about these physical things can help us unpack our emotional baggage and get ready to move on.

There are the stories and even jokes that are part of the congregation—the things that are told every year at the annual meeting, such as the memories of great moments: an unexpected success, a surprising discovery, a long-lost member's return. Deaths and births. The day the organ blew the fuses. The day the janitor got into the sacramental wine. Again, this is a time for revisiting those memories and treasuring them.

There are the people everyone remembers—the special Sunday school teacher, the choir director (the one from heaven and also the one from hell), the reader who lost his teeth saying "Deuteronomy," the visiting preacher who got locked into the men's room. You'll have your own list; every parish does. Take time to bring those stories back. Relish them. Allow people to tell them over and over.

Telling these stories, laughing together, and sometimes being on the point of tears together—all of this helps your congregation come to terms with its history. And the point of it is to make your story your support for moving into the

future. It is helping set your compass for the story ahead and keeping you from being locked into the past.

Your history can block your future, or it can give you a foundation for your future. You can stay focused on what you used to be and try to recreate it. (“Why don’t we just keep doing it the way we did it when the former pastor first came?”) Or you can use that history like a launching pad. (“We’ve always been able to make lemonade out of the lemons we’ve been handed—I bet the next stage of our congregation will be far better than what we’ve known in the past!”)

That is your first developmental task: to live into your history so that you are freed to go ahead into the future without crippling handicaps, without always looking back over your shoulder.

Work on that developmental task will occur at each of the sequential steps—most obviously during termination and self-study, but there will be dimensions that come up all through the time between pastors. As a matter of fact, you are likely to find it so engaging that it will become a regular part of congregational life, reflected in dinners and retreats, meetings and festivals, even as you begin making new history with the new pastor. When you welcome your new pastor, you may want to gather around him or her and retell some of those same stories, thus bringing the new pastor into your story.

The Second Developmental Task: Discovering a New Identity

Congregations, like people, tend to get a fix on who they are at particular times, then stick with that identity until something comes along that shakes them out of their ruts. Many of us remember being startled at looking in a mirror and dis-

covering white hair that has replaced the youthful black hair we remember. Our self-identity changes in fits and starts.

I remember a congregation that had a sense of itself as a congregation made up of young couples with lots of children. When I looked at the people in that congregation, they were all well into middle age and their children were mostly off at college or work. Many of them were grandparents. But in the heady years in which that congregation started, they *had* been young couples, and they did a lot of planning and programming around family life and Sunday school for young children.

The time when a pastor leaves is a rich time for a congregation to update its perception of itself. It is a time to learn what new kinds of people have become part of their life (I remember myself trying to do this once and being astonished to discover that the largest single demographic group in the parish was of single women heads of household). What has happened to the profile of ages in the congregation and of the kinds of work the people are engaged in? This is a time for counting things and comparing to old counts—who are the pledgers or regular contributors and where do they live? If you've got some people with an instinct for numbers, turn them loose on the records of marriages and baptisms—try to find out where those people are and what's happened to them. You may be surprised at how many people with significant links to the congregation feel neglected but are open to re-connecting.

What about the *parish*? I have been sloppy in using the words *parish* and *congregation* fairly interchangeably. In fact, the words have different connotations, coming from different histories of "church." *Congregation* tends to reflect the more evangelical traditions of the "free church" movements and is very widely used in American Protestantism. The experience

of the local church in that tradition more characteristically thinks of the sum total of the people associated with that local institution. It is oriented to the people who make up the worshiping community.

Up until now, I have been talking about the self-identity of the *congregation*—the people who are about to lose their pastor. Now I want to switch gears to talk about that local church as it is experienced in other religious traditions—the churches who look back on a history of being “established” churches, related to the political world. In such contexts, the local church is called *parish*, which denotes an amount of territory, a place with geographic bounds. As *congregation* speaks of the people who go to the local church, *parish* speaks of the area surrounding that local church and all the inhabitants thereof. Those two meanings are often present when people talk about their local church, but they differ in that in the first case the emphasis is on the people who worship together; in the second, the emphasis is on the area with its total population.

The point here is that there really are *two* self-identifications that need to be rethought when the pastor leaves. I have been talking about the local church’s identity as a congregation, but thought also needs to be given to the local church’s identity as parish. This simply means getting a new fix on what is going on in the community in which this local church is geographically located. Just as the congregation needs to see how its membership has shifted and changed since it last formed its identity, even so the sense of identity of the community needs to be rethought.

This is a time to do demographic studies of the area around the church. How has the economy changed? What kinds of immigration has affected the area? What has happened to the age profile of the community? What has happened to the

level of poverty, and what different ethnic groups are part of the area now? And, of course, how do those data fit with similar data from the membership of the congregation?

As the church works with these data, it is likely to have lots of surprises connecting its congregation with its sense of parish or “turf.” The church I go to on Sundays is on the corner of Massachusetts and Wisconsin Avenues in Washington, D.C. As a congregation, we consist of some 1,500 people residing all over the Washington metropolitan area, many working in jobs related to the U.S. government or other professional jobs, with an increasing number of retired people. We are thin, but growing, in children and young people. As a parish, we sense a special call to minister to our northwest Washington neighborhood’s many apartment dwellers, but we also feel a responsibility to be a presence of faith in many governmental agencies in which our people work, in many neighborhoods throughout the region, and we have a sense of ecumenical partnership in caring for the homeless and hungry who live in the area. All of those are part of our self-identity, but all are also changing every year.

Most denominational offices can put congregations in touch with agencies that can provide elaborate demographic studies. This is a time to indulge in such study—but with a warning: many demographic studies are absolutely inaccessible to intelligent human beings without someone who can lead you through the lists of data and different colored maps. Many cities and counties have planning agencies that will be delighted to help you learn what you need to know about the context in which this local church exists and help you get a new sense of identity. What’s good is that people of those agencies are paid to bring such presentations to local groups—and many are good at it.

Churches, of course, will find it important to their own identity to study the similarities and differences between their

congregation and their parish. In examining that tension they are likely to get new insight into what God may be calling the church to pay attention to.

At the time of pastoral search, this rediscovery of identity is an important ingredient in thinking about what you need leadership in facing. All through the seven sequential steps you will have time to touch this sense of your emerging identity, but it will be particularly true as you do your self-study and translate that self-study into the profile of the kind of leadership you think you need.

The Third Developmental Task: Allowing for Needed Leadership Changes

While a church is going through a pastoral change, there is one particularly important dynamic that leaders need to note and help to happen. Pastors tend to draw close to them a group of leaders who, over time, come to enjoy contributing time and energy to help lead the work of the congregation. Often these leaders come to leadership because they enjoy the pastor's way of doing things and enjoy working with him or her.

It is absolutely natural and healthy for some of those who have been long-time dependable leaders to see the change of pastors as a time to step back from the same degree of day-to-day involvement. It is also just as natural for some of the members of the congregation to see the leaving of one pastor and the coming of another as a good time to begin offering their own different gifts of leadership.

It is the work of the leaders of the congregation and the search committee to look for opportunities to facilitate this healthy movement of members into new leadership positions and allow those who want to step back from leadership to do so. The search committee itself is an opportunity

for using at least a few people who have not been leaders before but have obvious leadership gifts. And on the fringes of the search committee there are other places where new leadership can be recruited: you will need leaders to help with the events surrounding the leaving of the previous pastor; you will need special groups to work with demographic data and even, perhaps, to administer questionnaires or manage group meetings. You will need many leaders and volunteers to manage the events in which the new pastor is welcomed and introduced to the community as well as to the congregation itself.

I still remember visiting a church when I was asked to preach soon after the pastor had left. After the worship service a member of the congregation came up to me at coffee hour, apparently impressed by my sermon. (I'll be honest—this doesn't always happen, which may be why I remember it!) She said to me, "You know, I am on the search committee, and I wonder if I could have your permission to put your name on our list." Somewhat flattered, I replied, "I really feel called to what I am doing, but tell me what your role on the committee is." "I've only been here seven years," she said, "so I've been named the newcomer on the committee." I don't believe she knew how much she had just told me about the congregation. Seven years and still being treated as a newcomer! That congregation had a different definition of "new" from the one I had. But at least I saw evidence that someone in the congregation was trying to open space for new leadership to be brought in.

All the leaders of the congregation need to have open eyes during this whole process of changing pastors. More and more laypeople will need to be called on for ideas and help, and leaders need to locate that potential and move those persons into roles for the future. It is also important to allow people who have led long and well to back away from leader-

ship. They will be needed again, but many of them need a sabbatical from direct responsibility for a time. Continuing leaders need to use this time especially to find their replacements from those who are ready to step forward.

The Fourth Developmental Task: Rediscovering the Denomination

For many congregations, the relationship with the denomination is filtered through the lens of the current pastor. If the pastor is deeply involved in denominational issues, the congregation is likely to hear much about those issues. If he or she is not so involved, the congregation may begin to be distanced from what is going on in the denomination (in this I mean both the regional form of the denomination and the national/international structures). It is almost irrelevant whether the denomination is “connectional” or “nonconnectional” in its polity.

Those two terms point to a continuum of relationship that ranges from a close, interactive relationship to a distant, independent relationship with denominational entities. I have found that the specific denomination is not as important in this continuum as is the relationship—in some denominations that have a high value for congregational independence and autonomy, many congregations have a very close relationship to what the regional church body is up to. At the same time, in denominations defined as closely linked, many congregations act as if they are totally separate from the regional body.

Those sets of relationship become habitual and reflect local and regional history, the personalities of many leaders over time, and the vision of the local pastor and congregational leaders. At the time of pastoral change, however, the local congregation is thrown into contact with the denomination

in an active, direct way. I see this as a real asset and opportunity. Instead of being ruled by experience of previous generations and pastors, the congregation's leaders have an opportunity to explore what kinds of relationships they want the congregation to have with the denomination, especially if those relationships have not been strong. If there has been a close relationship, this is an opportunity to build linkages that better reflect how the congregation wants to build future links, which may be more independent.

I have found most regional and national denominational offices to have access to resources, ideas, and savvy people who can usually be helpful to congregations. They have training programs for leaders, resources (in media and print), and they know where other resources can be found. Sometimes they have contracts with companies that provide all kinds of other resources, demographic, consultative, and so forth.

Denominational offices also have access to professional dossiers of clergy and can help the congregation get them. They have a stake in the growth and health of each congregation as well. Generally, they are in the business of helping congregations.

The time of pastoral change is an opportunity for the congregation to get a first-hand experience of how the denomination works, how helpful its resources are, and how sensitive it is to the congregation's real situation. Because you *have* to work with them at such a time (they often are one of the places that is best at helping you locate names—of interim pastors, of consultants, of potential pastor candidates), this is a good time to make the connections that you think will be helpful when the new pastor comes and into the future.

Don't forget that in the future you will, from time to time, need some help. Denominational groups can provide support and training for ordained leaders, programs the congregation cannot mount on its own, help when conflict hits or when

stress is overwhelming. It often can help with financial advice. Also, when denominations are doing their work well, they can challenge the congregation to greater effectiveness.

The point? During the change of pastors there will be a number of opportunities to check what resources the denomination can provide and an opportunity to bring them into a more effective collegial linkage with you and thus be more effective in doing what you need to do together.

The Fifth Developmental Task: Commitment to New Directions in Ministry

If you just stick with it on the journey through the inevitable seven steps outlined in chapter 3, you will end up with a new pastor. The way our systems are set up, it is almost impossible to end up without a pastor. That's not the real question, however.

The question is, is that all you want? Is all you want a hired hand to manage the preaching and the worship and to make out the annual reports to the denomination?

The whole point of this book is to help you to go through the things you have to do in such a way that you come out in a new place. I want you to come out with new visions of what God wants you to be and do. I want you to come out with some real new commitments about what is important and what is not. I want you to know yourself to be in a team with others equally committed to a new future and a new ministry.

The other side? Yes, I want you to know that the pastor you have selected has also selected you and that you are bound to each other for a purpose: to build a worshiping, working community of faithful people who have discovered a direction of ministry and intend to pursue it. Together.

I make no demand that you do all this the "right" way, because I do not know what that way is for you. I expect you

will make mistakes and miss lots of opportunities on your journey of the next months or years. Some things you will have to invent as you go along. Some things that go wrong you will have to figure out how to fix.

But all along, from the moment you discover your pastor is leaving until well after the new pastor is in place, you are journeying toward that common commitment to new life and new mission. You are not in a “hiring process.” You are in a transformation process. You will be transformed and your new pastor will be transformed.

This business of finding new commitment to a new ministry is not what you do at the end of the process, it is how you approach every step of the way. It is behind how you deal with each other and your former pastor as you grieve and celebrate your losses and accomplishments. It is part of your discovering how to do what you have to do. It is at the heart of your studying your past and your future needs and looking at your community’s needs. It is in how you make your decisions, and it is the basis for your negotiations with your new pastor.