



Team Works

February 2003

A Resource for Congregations from Hamilton Conference Staff

WHY DO MINISTERS LEAVE?

By Jenny Stephens

“Just when we get our ministers trained the way we like them, they up and leave. Why don’t they stay longer?”

I hear this cry or other similar sentiments expressed by congregational members losing a beloved minister. From ministers I hear the comment, “If only things were different. I would have stayed but I couldn’t.”

This article invites congregations and ministers to reflect on the varied reasons that ministers leave. From your reflections strategies might be developed to enhance the pastoral relationship so that a minister does not feel compelled to leave prematurely, thereby potentially inhibiting the goals for mission and ministry established by the pastoral charge. The content is based on my observations as Personnel Minister working with many ministers, pastoral charges, ministry and personnel committees and presbytery pastoral relations committees, rather than a rigorous study based on statistics and deliberate conversation. It focuses on pastoral relationships where the minister is called rather than appointed because appointments, by their nature, are time limited, whereas calls are open-ended.

Pastoral relationships are not forever. In the United Church of Canada, perhaps from our Methodist roots, we believe in an itinerant professional ministry. Congregations benefit from changing ministerial leadership because it is one way to address the dilemma that one minister cannot please all the people all of the time (or all the people any of the time?), so ministers move on and allow another to take their place. It also allows a congregation the benefits of different skills and gifts at different stages in its own life cycle. As many a longtime church member will say, “Ministers come and go, but this church belongs to us, and

no minister is going to make me leave my church.” From the perspective of a minister, this itinerancy or moving on, has the value that different pastoral relationships can lead to increased spiritual growth and professional learning, there is little likelihood of boredom, there are many opportunities to try new things, use a different combination of skills and gifts, and to “grow in wisdom.”

Change in ministerial leadership, then, is part of who we are. Yet, many congregations mourn the departure of their minister. “Why now? The timing couldn’t be worse!” Think about the following answers to “Why now?”

Personal Reasons

I offer this reason first to get it out of the way because it is the one over which the congregation has least control. Ministers leave because they have fallen in love and want to make their home with their covenanted partner and move to another place. Ministers leave because their covenanted relationship with their partner has broken down and they choose to leave the congregation in order to create the least disturbance in the community. Ministers leave because their partner has a new job in another part of the country, their parents need them closer to home, their children have special needs which dictate access to facilities or resources not available within commuting distance of their pastoral charge. Ministers leave because their health fails them, because retirement beckons or because a death in the family causes them to reassign their priorities.

A pastoral charge, however much they love their minister and want that person to stay, can do nothing about a minister leaving for personal reasons. Personal reasons are events in ministers’ lives which are unrelated to the pastoral relationship but which lead the minister to request a change in pastoral relationship. When a minister can be honest about these personal reasons for leaving there is

Team Works

February 2003

Team Works is a resource for congregational leaders, produced quarterly by Hamilton Conference Staff, The United Church of Canada.

EDITORIAL BOARD:

John Asling, Minister for Mission & Communication;

Ann Fleming, Minister for Christian Nurture;

Fred Monteith, Executive Secretary;

Jenny Stephens, Personnel Minister

EDITOR:

John Asling, Minister for Mission & Communication

PRODUCTION EDITOR:

Barbara Hampson, Support Staff

Team Works may be copied; please make us aware of how the copies are being used.

Please send feedback on this publication to
John Asling,
(905) 659-3343,
P.O. Box 100,
Carlisle, ON L0R 1H0
jasling@hamconf.org

usually little damage to congregational life. People accept that ministers have their own lives to live and are usually able to say appropriate farewell in word and gift and reinvest in a new pastoral relationship.

A New Calling

There are times in our lives when we feel called out of a situation or called to another ministry. I have experienced both of these in my own life. In fact, the pattern of my professional life is that I have felt called away from something prior to discovering to what I am being called. For example, as a young woman I was very clear that my call was to be a Christian in the workplace, which for me was the scientific laboratory. I also was called to local preaching within the Methodist Church of England and Wales, a ministry exercised by many lay people. After two postdoctoral research fellowships in Canada, it became clear to me that God was calling me out of scientific research but it was more than a year before I could move beyond saying that I was looking for employment in science with time for my church work, to a clear sense of calling to ordained ministry.

For others, a request for change in pastoral relationship comes because of a strong calling to something else and the minister struggles about whether then it is truly time to leave this particular calling. A new pastoral charge can be an exciting opportunity but is it really time to leave the current interesting setting? Sometimes these discernments are made because, "There won't be another opportunity to do this kind of ministry in the near future. I feel called to it so now must be the time, even though I am not feeling called out of where I am."

For others, the call to a new place seems to be in synchrony with the sense of needing to leave the present place. For example, I have heard a minister tell about a phone call from a pastoral charge inviting him or her to apply, making them realize how much they were looking for a change and then testing that with the Ministry and Personnel (M&P) Committee and discovering that, in their

discernment too, this is an appropriate time.

The role for the congregation in these journeys of discernment and calling for the minister can be varied. Some ministers make the journey independent of anyone in the congregation. Other ministers ask their M&P committees annually to give them a read on the longevity of the pastoral relationship. As I did my discernment about leaving the pastoral charge to which I was most recently called, I worked with a counselor through the Employee Assistance Program, talked to close friends and family members and spoke with a trusted confidant in the congregation. I was surprised to discover when I announced my request for change that the congregations already had a sense that I would be moving on at some time. I believe we preach to ourselves as well as to the congregations and for God and often we and others hear in our preaching deeper yearnings of which we are not yet aware.

Honest feedback to a minister can be helpful in times of discernment and transition.

Feeling Unappreciated

Even the finest of ministers like to feel supported and appreciated. The right kind of support at the right time may help a congregation keep a minister from leaving before necessary. Whether it is at the time of the annual salary and benefit negotiation or at many other times in the church year where there is opportunity for affirmation of your minister or ministry team, congregations and their lay leaders need to take opportunities for thanksgiving and support of their ministers. Like lay leaders in a congregation, ministers too are nurtured by acknowledging their part in a successful project.

As I receive phone calls in the late Fall from ministers trying to negotiate with M&P committees and from M&P committees trying to negotiate with ministers, I realize that this is an area in which all parties need coaching. I have felt disempowered facing members of an M&P committee in a rural

area suffering personal losses in income that year because of crop failure. I know M&P members who fear that their minister will leave prematurely because of unresolved salary negotiations yet feel caught in their role of supporting the minister and being a member of an Official Board concerned over financial shortage. This topic is worthy of a whole other article so just to say that ministers stay longer when the negotiation process is clear and fair, when their salary and benefits reflect an appreciation of their skills and gifts and when there are resources to equip them to do the programming asked of them.

Conflict

Inter-congregational conflict can be very wearing both on congregational members and on ministers. In multi-point charges, for example, where there is competition between the points or just plain bad feeling, the minister gets tired of being pulled by one or the other congregation. While it is natural that any particular minister might feel more connected to one point or the other, the minister is the minister of each of them and needs to be careful not to show favouritism. Where the demands of one seem to railroad the needs of the other, a minister becomes exhausted balancing conflicting demands. This is sometimes made worse by a poor administrative structure where making a decision that needs negotiating between points seems multi-layered and repetitive.

In both the multi-point charges in which I have worked, one a six point larger parish in Manitoba and the other two points in Bruce Presbytery, I have been fortunate to inherit a system that worked reasonably well. The keys are a joint board with appropriate representation from the participating churches, strong lay leadership from people who have a sense of the whole pastoral charge and an active M & P committee with representatives from all points.

It is challenging for a minister when there is potential for growth in one congregation of a multi-point charge and requests for a second more modern service but the minister cannot do that because of the needs of the other points. In a situation of inter-congregational conflict, ministers can only balance conflicting demands for so long, usually a few years, before feeling the need to move to a less complex system. Many would exchange their multi-point charge in which the congregations don't get along with a single point charge, even if it has internal issues.

Single point charges are not without their challenges. Such a pastoral relationship needs a minister who is not naïve and has the opportunity to develop some political savvy. Ministers must avoid making the conflict about

themselves, remain self-aware of their own needs as well as their skills and limitations. Ministers choosing to leave because of conflict is common. Some leave because they lack the skills; some because the personal toll in terms of stress and health is too much; some because they feel their energies are going into keeping tension to the minimum at the expense of meaningful and faithful ministry.

Conflict within a staff team can also lead to a request for change. Usually conflict in a staff team comes about because team members have different visions of what the team is, how the work is divided or how decisions are made. While sometimes named as personality issues, more often it is the misunderstandings and lack of common vision and values which causes the break-up. The lay members of the staff team continue to be the most vulnerable to staff break up, in part because they are under appointment rather than call and congregations will be quick to cut the program rather than deal with staff conflict. Diaconal ministers, even when under call in a staff team, are also vulnerable, especially when they are part time. Healthy teams are possible where the particular roles and the skills and gifts of the individuals are respected, the job descriptions clear and the expectations of each other around accountability and style explored fully.

When I worked in a team with two other ministers on a six point charge, the M&P committee was intentional in its support of time spent to build the team. One year when the team was pretty dysfunctional, money was assigned for us to see a professional therapist to work through our differences. The congregations benefited when the staff team worked well.

It's a Poor Fit

Some ministers and Joint Search committees are better at discernment than others. Pressure of time, the need to be in a particular town or city and lack of self-awareness can all lead to bad matches. It isn't that the minister lacks skills or the congregation is unfocused in its ministry and mission, it's that the skills of the minister do not match the needs of the congregation. Ministers leave a poor fit either because the congregation asks them to or because they come to realise they made a mistake. Usually these are the shortest ministries.

It can happen because theologies clash or because visions of mission don't jive. A minister preaching personal salvation exclusively will not survive long in a justice oriented congregation which wants to be involved in issues in the community. A strong liberationist may not be enjoyed by a conservative congregation.

It can happen because enough time has not been spent discerning whether the skills of a minister and his/her personality make for a more Chief Executive Officer style of leadership which will likely be appreciated more in a program style church or a more chaplaincy style leader who might be enjoyed in a family size church.

Congregations can reduce the incidence of ministers leaving through a bad fit by developing a good Needs Assessment with skills profile and thorough job descriptions; by being honest about who the congregation really is as opposed to who they would like to be; and by selecting the best discerners of the congregation for the Joint Search Committee. Presbyteries also need to do their part in assigning presbyters who facilitate the search process and are discerning individuals.

Congregations, perhaps through their M&P committees, can save a lot of heartbreak later on by naming a bad fit early before conflict between minister and congregation has built into explosive proportions. Good ministers can be damaged by unresolved differences in expectations and need to deal with their hurt prior to beginning a new pastoral relationship.

It's Time

It may be time for a minister to leave because they feel their work is done. Congregational life, like our family life, has its own rhythms and there are times when a particular style of leadership works in one season of the congregation's life but not in another. Equally, a season in the minister's life might work for a period of time within one pastoral relationship and then the need to use different skills or a desire for another setting becomes essential.

I hear ministers say, "I have done all I can do here. The congregation is programmed out and I will feel lifeless if I don't have the opportunity to initiate new programs and mission directions." Ministers, like congregations, need opportunities to grow and learn, to experience new challenges and offer themselves in new ways. For ministers this is the vitality of an itinerant ministry and for congregations it provides opportunity for renewal.

Less often, it becomes time for a pastoral relationship to end when the congregation is disbanding or amalgamating. In the case of amalgamations, there needs to be much discernment about the wisdom of any minister in the amalgamating churches applying for the succeeding calls.

Why Ministers Stay

When there is good fit and meaningful work to be done in an atmosphere of commitment and co-operation, ministers will stay. Congregations can maintain healthier pastoral relationships when the system is open and individuals and committees are willing to learn and grow in healthy ways. Mutual accountability for the mission and ministry between lay leaders and the ministry staff team can be facilitated by a well trained and skillful M & P committee. There needs to be honest feedback with the minister and willingness to share and work on expectations. Ministers are healthier in pastoral relationships when they are part of healthy systems outside of the congregation. Family, friends, leisure activities, a personal support group or study group offer a balance to work. Pastoral relationships are healthier when the minister is encouraged to take appropriate time off and is able to negotiate salary and benefits in an open manner.

While a minister leaving is a natural part of church life, too often a pastoral relationship is over before the ministry is completed and there are bitter endings which are not conducive to good mission. Reflecting on why ministers leave may enable the pastoral relationship to continue its natural course so that when leaving happens neither the congregation's mission nor the minister are destroyed. Pastoral charges are the primary unit of church life from which faithful mission can happen and faithful disciples develop. I encourage ministers and congregations to think more fully about sustaining healthy pastoral relationships so that ministerial leadership can enhance and promote the congregation's mission.

Jenny Stephens is Hamilton Conference's Personnel Minister.



Suggested Reading:

James M. Antal, *Considering A New Call*. The Alban Institute, 2000.

James E. Hightower, Jr. and W. Craig Gilliam, *A Time for Change?* The Alban Institute, 2000.

Gregg Levoy, *Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life*. Three Rivers Press, 1997.