Pastoral Transitions

A Guide to transitioning well

The River Conference
of the Free Methodist Church

One of the most stressful seasons in the life a local church is the transition of a lead Pastor. Congregants often compare the loss of an effective lead pastor to the loss of family member, confidante, or close friend. Additionally, many Pastors feel a sense of loss even if they are transitioning to another ministry opportunity as they are deeply invested in the relationships, ministries, and mission of the churches they serve. To better prepare Churches and transitioning Pastors, we urge those who are transitioning or anticipate transitioning, develop a transition plan in conjunction with their District Leader and The River Conference Superintendent.

WHAT IS A TRANSITION PLAN?

A transition plan is a written plan that details the process of a pastoral transition. It involves the Lead Pastor, the Superintendent, the District Leader, the church Delegates, and the incoming Pastor, when available.

FREE METHODIST TRANSITION DISTINCTIVES

The Free Methodist Book of Discipline provides the framework for pastoral appointments. There are several assumptions that should be understood by the transitioning Pastor and the transitioning church.

1. The Free Methodist Church works on the appointment system. All Lead/Senior Pastors are appointed by their conference, with input from the local church. Specifically, each conference has a Ministry Appointment Committee (MAC) who has the authority to recommend an appointment, which is approved by the annual conference.

2. Lead/Sr Pastors who are retiring are expected to worship elsewhere once a new pastor is appointed. In large churches, or churches that are operating complex collaborations, there may be a time in which there is an overlap of the incoming Pastor and the transitioning Pastor, but that should be minimized. Ideally, the incoming Pastor is given the freedom to lead, organize, and focus as the Holy Spirit leads. The presence of a former lead pastor severely handicaps the incoming pastor, even when the incoming pastor is simply being promoted from Asst. Pastor to Lead Pastor.

3. Pastoral Staff serve at the discretion of the Lead Pastor. All pastoral staff are required to turn in a letters of resignation when the new Lead Pastor is officially appointed. Most often, the incoming pastor will not act upon the resignation immediately or at all. The incoming pastor is free to develop his own pastoral staff and to work with the local board of administration to develop structures.

4. The Transition Team will be asked to complete a Church Profile (included in this document) and, in that profile, will be an opportunity to discuss the attributes of the next lead pastor as well as specific pastors you would recommend. However, the transitioning pastor will not interview or participate in the MAC meeting where appointment recommendations are made.

TRANSITION PLANNING

1 DISCERNMENT This is a devoted time of prayer and counsel in which the Lead Pastor discerns that it is time to transition away from their current role.

2 DISCUSSION The desire to transition is shared with the District Leader and Superintendent. The transition parameters will be set at this time.

3 DEVELOPMENT A Transition Team is created that consists of your church's delegates and 1-2 others who can represent the Church and facilitate communication with the Church and Conference.

4 DIRECTION The Transition Team works with the church's Local Board of Administration (LBOA) to address structural or financial issues that will foster a seamless transition between leaders. Ongoing communications between The River Conference and the local church continues. A Pastoral candidate is interviewed by the LBOA and compensation for incoming pastor is negotiated.

5 DEPLOYMENT The transitioning Pastor is celebrated and the new Pastor is installed per the transition plan.

DISCERNMENT

In the Free Methodist Church, Pastors are appointed to churches by their Conference. A lead pastor will transition to a different role in a number of different ways.

- The Lead Pastor requests to leave or retire through their own discernment.
- The Lead Pastor becomes disabled amidst an appointment
- The Church, through its delegates, formally request for the appointed Pastor not to be re-appointed. This request can be supported or rejected by the conference MAC
- The Conference disciplines the Lead Pastor for cause and the Pastor is suspended or expelled.

The vast majority of transitions are in response to the Lead Pastor discerning that he or she is ready for retirement, no longer effective, or responding to a calling in another Free Methodist Church. The lead pastor is asked yearly whether they would like re-appointment. Keep in mind re-appointment is not automatic.

DISCUSSION

It is essential that decisions for transition be communicated with the Conference in the formational stages. In conjunction with the District Leader and Superintendent, parameters regarding timelines, search processes, and formal separation are established.

DEVELOPMENT

Transition Teams can greatly reduce the stress and tension of both the transitioning Pastor and the Church. Once the parameters of transition are known, then the Transition Team should be formed to communicate and facilitate a smooth transition. The team should consist of the Conference Delegates, and 1-2 leaders of the church (if desired). One of the important matters for the Transition Team to understand is that they will be consulted in the recruiting of new leadership, but ultimately, the authority to appoint comes from the MAC of the River Conference. The MAC weighs heavily on the input of the transitioning Pastor and Transition Team and will open the search nationally. This system allows for the Conference and the local church to work together under the power of the Holy Spirit, to identify the best candidates going forward.

DIRECTION

During this phase of the transition, the Transition Team helps the church prepare by getting its administrative, financial, and organizational systems in order. Many Pastors have worked hard and received the "hometown" discount. That means that they receive less in terms of compensation and benefits because the church was not financially able to offer appropriate wages. However, in recruiting pastors, they typically receive a similar salary, commensurate with experience, as local public school teachers. In the Direction Phase, members of the MAC will have had the opportunity to meet several candidates and will interview, initiate background reviews, and check references for the candidates who have the potential to lead the church. Ultimately, the MAC will recommend a single candidate, or pastoral team, for the role. Once a candidate is chosen, an interview with the church board and a tour of the facilities are arranged. Terms of a Pastor's compensation is often negotiated during this visit.

DEPLOYMENT

This is the phase of the transition plan where the departing pastor is celebrated and separates from the ministry. A Check list of things that need to be completed prior to separation is a essential tool and is included in this document. The Transition Team should work with the new Pastor to determine a date of installation and when compensation begins.