

When a New Pastor Arrives: Five Essential Keys to Beginning a Relationship

Bishop Ken Carter

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This week a number of men and women have left a community and a congregation and have traveled to begin a new ministry. This process is physically, emotionally and spiritually challenging.

The appointive cabinet's role in reflecting on the gifts of clergy and sending them to assignments began in December, and continued through the middle of April. Our work included prayer, consultation with laity and clergy and listening. In the end, the appointments were affirmed at the Florida Annual Conference, meeting in Orlando earlier this month.

And now, in many congregations, a new season of life and ministry is beginning.

It is important to say first that a change in clergy leadership is **disruptive**. The appointive cabinet does this work in response to retirements, requests from local churches and clergy, and the presence of decline or status quo or conflict. *We are quite clear that this is not about change for the sake of change.*

And yet, in a context of status quo, decline or conflict, **disruption can be constructive**. It can be God's new creation (2 Corinthians 5. 17). A few elements of this change are essential if the new season is to be generative.

1. The pastor and the congregation will each need to **make peace with their own pasts**. At times the congregation will want to project their feelings about their former leader onto the new pastor. And at times the pastor will have unresolved issues from the last ministry that have not been fully addressed. Making peace with the past will allow each to see the other with new eyes and even a new heart.
2. The congregation will be asking, about their new leader, "Will he or she love us, as we are?" "Will he or she come to know us and our community?" "Will he or she be a **good shepherd**?" See my 2016 Ordination Sermon, "The Odor of the Sheep". These questions are related to wisdom of one of my mentors, Ken Callahan, who noted that *people experience us first as a shepherd, then as a preacher, and finally as a leader.*
3. How is this done in practice? It is important, in the first weeks, to have scheduled and structured times to 1) **share meals** and 2) **tell stories**. How will the pastor begin to know the stories of the congregation and community? How will congregational leaders begin to know the story of the pastor's life, his or her conversion to Christ and call to ministry?

4. The relationship of clergy and congregation is over time about much more than whether either likes or is happy with the other. Over time, **the more important question is we engage the mission field**, which is the community surrounding us. In the Florida Conference we are attempting to see the children at risk in schools new to our schools as “our kids”. This is one simple way the leadership of a church can begin to see the mission field.

5. Lastly, in a time of deep change (which is surely the first week of a new pastor's life and ministry in a new congregation), it is essential that **we rely upon God and the disciplines God uses to restore, renew and equip**. This is reading scripture, interceding for the people, having a conversation with a mentor, friend or district superintendent, taking a Sabbath day (even in the midst of unfinished work) and planning some family ritual (where appropriate) that acknowledges the family's experience of transition.

I will be praying, by name this week for the clergy who are entering into new places of leadership. **I pray that you will experience the prevenient grace of God that has gone before you.** I pray that you will announce the good news of Jesus Christ to the people on your first Sunday. And I pray that God will supply your every need.

I will also be praying, by name this week for the congregations who are receiving new pastors. **I pray that you will receive a pastor who will come to love you and to lead you.** I pray that together you will see the mission field that surrounds you. And I pray that you experience in this new season a revival and a renewed sense of the nearness of God.

None of this happens by accident. It calls for intentionality, planning and walking together. May God bless you and be with you in this first week of ministry together.