

The church has a new pastor. When will it start to feel normal?

August 17, 2007

Posted: 8/17/07

The church has a new pastor. When will it start to feel normal?

By Hannah Elliott

Associated Baptist Press

NEW YORK (ABP)—When a beloved pastor leaves a church, the replacement often faces an uphill battle in winning the trust and respect of the congregation. Sometimes, the newcomer faces a challenge simply in getting people to remember his name.

Winfred Moore, pastor of First Baptist Church in Amarillo for more than 30 years, said long after his arrival, members would mistakenly call him by the name of his predecessor—who had retired years earlier.

George Mason, who followed the 30-year tenure of Bruce McIver at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, knows the feeling.

**“It’s very important to realize that just because you hold the title doesn’t mean you hold the trust of people.”
-George Mason**

At a celebration of his first 10 years at Wilshire, all but two of the people who spoke began their remarks by talking about McIver.



**See related
articles:**

- [PASSING THE TORCH: Does pastoral transition have to be hard?](#)
- [Collaboration essential part of effective mentoring](#)
- The church has a new pastor. When will it start to feel normal?
- [Pastoral residency offers mentoring for young ministers](#)
- [Students want to serve God's kingdom' not necessarily in the church](#)

“It was a little difficult for me,” Mason said, adding that it reminded him of how much they loved McIver. “That was a little bit of a wake-up call for me that I still wasn’t completely there yet.”

The day of McIver’s funeral—12 years after Mason became pastor—another member told Mason, “Now you can be my pastor.”

Mason understood.

“She wasn’t being mean about that, but she was being honest,” he said. He has led Wilshire 18 years.

“You have to stay long enough in those circumstances to be able to experience those transitions.”

Apparently, patience is a virtue for an incoming pastor.

Mike Clingenpeel, pastor of River Road Church, Baptist, in Richmond, Va., said there’s no specific length of time that must elapse before a new pastor is accepted. It all depends on the personality and characteristics of the congregation. Some families might accept the newcomer the first week. In other cases, it may be years before a bond happens, he said.

“I think you earn the right to be a pastor over time by a series of decisions and acts of pastoral fidelity,” he said. “It’s a process that you feel. There can be a defining moment in pastoral ministry that in retrospect you say, ‘Wow, that’s the place where I really became pastor of that church.’ It may be around a building program. It may be around a new long-range or strategy plan for the church. It may be a significant event. It may be that you perform a funeral for a patriarch or a matriarch of the church.”

More often than not, that realization comes with perspective, Clingenpeel said. He has led River Road three years, and while he said some significant bonding already has taken place, “I’m not sure I have the perspective yet that allows me to look back and say that was the moment.”

The congregation also has specific roles in accepting the new pastor without shunning the former pastor.

In 2001, the Center for Congregational Health released an essay that said pastoral search committees are the “most important leadership group in the congregation. ... This whole experience is a delicate dance between God’s will and our perceptions about what is best. Even after the most extensive and carefully executed search, no one knows the true success of the project until the new senior pastor has been in place for a year.”

Many pastors who have gone through such a transition agree that the congregation, with the help of the predecessor, must allow the new pastor to fully be the pastor. If that doesn't happen, the successor doesn't have a chance, Clingenpeel said.

The first order of business for a new pastor is establishing relationships in the congregation, he added.

"The first year of a new pastor's work is principally establishing relationships. And eventually those can become pastoral relationships," Clingenpeel said.

Sunday school socials, family birthday parties and rites of passage are all events in which church members can include a new pastor.

"Participate in life as a church. Let the new pastor be successful. And then give the new pastor an opportunity to do some things that are new and different and don't require that everything that he or she does be identical to the predecessor," Clingenpeel said.

Sometimes, the new pastor may push too hard for change or lack support from outgoing leadership. Especially when retiring pastors choose to stay within or near the church, the roles of communication, cooperation and support are essential for success, pastors say.

Mason said he "blessed" the church by "blessing" his predecessor, and it paid off. Newer pastors should consider asking their predecessor, if he or she is still affiliated with the church, to help with weddings and funerals. And inviting them back to preach, teach or have lunch seems to go a long way. The main thing is to keep communication lines open, Mason said.

"It's very important to realize that just because you hold the title doesn't mean you hold the trust of people," Mason said. "You can't rush people by demanding that they follow you. The church has to believe that you respect

their history from before you arrived.”

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Baptist churches, in Texas, the BGCT, the nation and around the world.