

## When Your Church is Without a Pastor

**I**t happens in every church sooner or later. Eventually, the beloved pastor that many looked to for spiritual guidance will depart for one reason or another. Occasionally, a minister may have the opportunity to devote his entire life to one particular congregation until he retires (or is promoted to Heaven), but pastoral transition occurs with far greater frequency in most churches.

First, when it comes time for your pastor to leave, remember to keep your eyes on the Lord, not the man. It is understandable how people can become attached to their pastor. He is rightly viewed as God's representative to preach and teach His Word, a trusted counselor and friend, a father figure of influence in our faith, a servant who sacrificed time and energy to love and care for us and our family. However, as remarkably important as God's servants are, we must always remember that they are merely mortals... and that our faith must be rooted in Christ alone, not in a man or any of His servants.

To be sure, no one will ever truly be able to replace your departed pastor. He was a unique person and will always be one of a kind... BUT his position as pastor can indeed be filled again. God will have another genuinely unique servant that He will send to lead the flock of God.

Pastoral change is not the end of the world. Change is a part of life, and although there will definitely be a need for some extra patience and flexibility by everyone in the congregation, you and your church will get through this... especially if you follow these tips:

**1. Be Faithful to Attend Services** – The lack of a permanent pastor can make some feel less enthused or connected with the church, and may promote more frequent absences or visitations to other churches. However, if there was ever a time your church needed you, this is it. Instead of finding more excuses to stay away, this should be a time to increase your faithfulness in every area. Don't be a fair-weather friend of the church... but remain faithful even during such cloudy or uncertain times.

**2. Be a Person of Prayer** – People in the church must always be persons sincerely devoted to prayer... but even more so during a time that their church is without a pastor. If he can, our enemy, Satan, will attempt to use the pastoral vacancy to incite mischief, conflict and discouragement in the flock, so prayer and spiritual vigilance is especially important during this time.

**3. Be Extra Patient and Understanding** – An interim period for any church may become tense and stressful, creating the possible atmosphere for any number of misunderstandings, so it is very helpful for everyone to add an extra seasoning of patience and sweetness to their attitudes. Usually, once the pastor is gone, the congregation will discover many of the things he did. Suddenly, the organization may not be run as smoothly as it once was... tasks may fall through the cracks or be forgotten about. It is not a time to criticize or find fault, but be understanding and pitch in and help make up the shortfalls.

**4. Continue to Contribute Financially** – During a time of leadership transition, church finances can often become one of the first casualties to suffer... so it is vitally important for you to re-

main steadfast with your tithes and offerings. Remember, the tithe belongs to the Lord, and continue to be faithful to Him, regardless of the changing nature of his church.

**5. Volunteer More than Usual** – Sometimes people look at changes in church leadership, as an opportunity to make changes of their own... perhaps to leave the church or to give up a position or responsibility. Not only is this a poor time to abandon the church, but is a critical time to step up and volunteer more than normal. The church is not merely an agency to provide a service or benefit to you... the church is a relationship-based community, a family, where people serve and bless "each other" mutually... and it takes everyone's participation to make it work the way it should. Another way to look at it, the church isn't as much like a restaurant, where patrons are "served" and "pampered"... but is more like a pot-luck dinner where everyone brings a dish to share with each other.

**6. Help Contribute to Unity** – During times uncertainty within an organization, voices of discouragement and discontent can often be heard in the ranks... but this is a moment your influence of support and encouragement is so needed to help promote peace and unity in the body. "Talk up" the church among your friends, speak encouragement and help promote harmony. There can be a variety of other outstanding leaders, elders, deacons in a church who will undoubtedly help bring unity and stability... but unless these persons have established recognized credibility, have spoken frequently before the body, or have expertise dealing with the varieties of personalities and sensitivities within a body, they will have their hands full. It can take consider-

able experience and tact to be a peacemaker and unify people... and helps if everyone will be a part of the solution, and not a part of the problem.

**7. Avoid Church Politics** – Politics is essentially a competition or struggle for control, influence or leadership, associated with promoting one’s self, opinions, or striving for position... something that is quite contrary to the theocratic philosophy of leadership that God ordained for His church. Unfortunately, power struggles are frequent in many churches and do far more harm than good. Do your best to contribute to the harmony of the body of believers and cooperate with those who are duly authorized to lead. Do not contend with those in authority, but support and pray for them... and let God make whatever changes that are needed. If everyone will seek to humble themselves, love and serve, God has an amazing way to bring people together with an obvious awareness of those whom He has chosen to lead.

**8. Don’t Waste the Opportunity** – What about the interim time between the pastor’s departure and the new pastor’s arrival? There is often a prevailing attitude that the spiritual focus and ministry of the church is suspended or stagnant during this period... but this shouldn’t be. God still has a vital purpose for every service, guest speaker or the ministry of an interim pastor... and it is important for the congregation to remain faithful and engaged, so that God’s intended work can be accomplished.

In God’s system of values, every scenario that comes our way is an opportunity ...to be tested, to learn, to grow spiritually... and an interim pe-

riod between pastors is no different. God let’s nothing go to waste. He uses the experiences of both “abundance” and “need” to benefit us... and ironically, we usually learn more from the latter. Among other things, when a church is in between pastors, the experience can help people become more responsible for their own spiritual growth, as well as the various of duties and tasks of the church. And often, it helps a church to more fully appreciate and value the role of a minister... as they begin to recognize the absence of the many tasks and chores he did.

**9. Finally, don’t panic and be at peace!** Do your part to pray, contribute and help as we have suggested... but the church will do better if everyone remains calm and steadfast in faith. Ultimately our Lord Jesus cares more about His church more than any of us do. Trust and rest in the fact that He stated that “He” will build His church... and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it! (Matt 16:18)

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*Unless otherwise stated, all scripture references were taken from The New King James Bible, © Thomas Nelson Inc., 1982.*

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