



Navigating Pastoral Transitions



A FIELD GUIDE FOR
CONGREGATIONS AND THEIR LEADERS

Walking together
through seasons of
change, listening for
God's call, and
embracing the future
with hope.



A FIELD GUIDE SERIES

VOLUME

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*Resources for Sessions, Pastor Nominating Committees,
Facilitators, and Congregational Leaders*



About This Field Guide Series

This Field Guide offers an overview of the pastoral transition journey. Its purpose is to help congregations and their leaders understand what lies ahead, recognize the purpose of each movement, and approach the journey with greater confidence and less anxiety.

Rather than functioning as a manual or checklist, this guide serves as a map. Healthy transitions are not mechanical processes to complete but journeys to be walked together. Every congregation follows a unique path, yet many of the movements are shared. Seeing those movements before beginning the journey helps reduce unnecessary anxiety and creates space for wiser, more faithful decisions.

Each Field Guide in this series is designed to stand on its own while contributing to a larger library of resources for pastors, sessions, facilitators, Pastor Nominating Committees, and congregational leaders. Some guides offer an overview of an entire process. Others explore a single movement in greater depth. Together they seek to cultivate healthy leadership, thoughtful discernment, and communities that become increasingly attentive to the Holy Spirit's guidance.

This guide invites you to see pastoral transition not simply as the search for another pastor, but as an opportunity to recognize where God is already at work—and to join that work together.

Introduction

Every Transition Is an Invitation

Every pastoral transition begins long before a congregation realizes it has begun. Before a retirement is announced, before a pastor accepts a new call, before a committee is elected, the Holy Spirit is often already preparing hearts, opening conversations, and inviting a congregation toward a new season of ministry.

Few experiences shape the life of a congregation more profoundly than the transition from one pastor to another. Familiar routines are interrupted. Questions outnumber answers. Excitement and grief often walk side by side. It is natural to wonder what comes next.

Many congregations assume their primary task is to find the next pastor.

The deeper invitation is to become the kind of congregation that can faithfully recognize God's next call.

That change in perspective shapes everything that follows.

Pastoral transitions are not interruptions in the Church's life. They are seasons of discernment. They invite congregations to remember, to listen, to pray, to imagine, and to grow together before they begin searching for new leadership. The search itself becomes healthier because the congregation has first become more attentive.

Think of this guide as a companion rather than a manual. Experienced travelers study the landscape before they begin walking. A map does not remove every steep climb, but it helps them understand where they are, what lies ahead, and why each stage of the journey matters. Congregations preparing for transition gain the same confidence by seeing the whole landscape before taking the next faithful step.

Throughout these pages you will notice several recurring themes. Relationships matter more than structures. Listening precedes deciding. Discernment is more faithful than urgency. Again and again, the Holy Spirit invites congregations to slow down enough to recognize the opportunities already unfolding in their midst.

Leadership shifts during a transition. Sessions, facilitators, Pastor Nominating Committees, pastors, and congregations all carry different responsibilities at different times. Yet no one makes the journey alone. The work belongs to the whole community.

My hope is that these pages will help your congregation see pastoral transition differently—not simply as replacing one pastor with another, but as a season in which God forms a congregation for the future already being prepared.

The greatest gift of a faithful transition is not simply a new pastor.

It is a congregation that has learned to recognize the movement of the Holy Spirit and to walk together with greater trust, hope, and courage.

Along the Journey Together

Seeing Transition Differently

Every pastoral transition begins with change.

A pastor retires. A call is accepted. A season of ministry comes to an end. Those are the visible events everyone recognizes.

Less obvious is what often begins long before the congregation realizes a transition is underway. The Holy Spirit is already preparing hearts, stirring conversations, and quietly opening possibilities that will only become clear in time.

Throughout Scripture, endings often become the doorway to new beginnings. The circumstances are never identical, but God's faithfulness is. Again and again, God meets people in seasons of uncertainty, gently leading them toward a future they cannot yet fully see.

The same is true for congregations.

A pastoral transition is more than replacing one pastor with another. It is an invitation to pause long enough to recognize where God may already be creating new opportunities for faithfulness.

Some congregations experience this season with excitement. Others experience grief.

Most experience both.

That is not a sign that something is wrong.

It is often a sign that something important is happening.

Some conversations will come easily. Others will uncover differences that have quietly waited beneath the surface. At times progress will seem slow. At other moments, everything may appear to happen at once.

People who have walked unfamiliar paths know that uncertainty does not always mean they are lost. Sometimes it simply means they have entered new terrain.

Congregations discover the same truth.

Anxiety often comes less from change itself than from believing we should already know the way forward.

Recognizing uncertainty as a natural part of the process allows a congregation to respond with patience instead of fear and curiosity instead of urgency.

This Field Guide is intended to serve as a map for that work.

A map does not remove every climb or answer every question. It simply helps travelers understand where they are, what lies ahead, and why each movement matters. In the same way, this guide offers an overview of the road ahead so your congregation can move forward with greater confidence and hope.

Every transition is unique.

Yet no congregation walks alone.

Generations of congregations have traveled this way before. Their experience reminds us that faithful transitions are measured less by how quickly we arrive than by how intentionally we walk together.

Every transition begins with change, but it is sustained by trust.

The circumstances that begin a transition are never the whole story. Even before the way ahead becomes clear, the Holy Spirit is already inviting congregations toward new life.

With that wider perspective, we are ready to step back and see the landscape as a whole. Like travelers pausing to orient themselves before continuing, congregations gain confidence when they understand the major movements before taking the next faithful step.

For Conversation

Which part of this movement most changes the way you think about pastoral transition?

Where might your congregation experience both hope and uncertainty at the same time?

What would help your congregation respond to uncertainty with trust rather than urgency?

How does recognizing the Holy Spirit's presence change the way you imagine the journey ahead?

What do you hope God will form in your congregation during this season?

Along the Journey Together

The Landscape of the Journey

Before setting out on unfamiliar ground, experienced travelers often pause to study the landscape. A map does not remove every climb, stream crossing, or unexpected turn. It simply offers perspective, helping them understand where they are, what lies ahead, and how the different parts of the journey fit together.

Pastoral transitions are much the same. Every congregation's experience will be unique. Some movements may take longer than expected. Others may overlap. At times you may find yourselves returning to an earlier conversation because new understanding or changing circumstances invite another look. That is not a sign that something has gone wrong. It is often how the Holy Spirit deepens discernment.

Rather than offering a checklist to complete, this guide describes six movements that many congregations experience during healthy transitions.

Ending Well honors relationships, gives thanks for ministry, and creates space for healthy new beginnings.

Preparing helps a congregation begin with shared expectations and confidence rather than urgency.

Remembering helps a congregation rediscover its story, values, and the ways God has shaped its life together.

Listening turns attention both inward and outward, helping congregations notice their community with fresh eyes and recognize where the Holy Spirit may already be at work.

Calling New Leadership becomes the work of recognizing a pastor whose gifts, vocation, and experience resonate with the future the congregation is beginning to see.

Developing the Ministry Discernment Profile gives voice to the congregation's growing understanding of its identity, vocation, and hope, inviting prospective pastors into a process of mutual discernment.

Beginning Ministry Together reminds us that calling a pastor is not the destination. It is the beginning of learning to build trust, shared purpose, and enduring partnership.

Each movement prepares the way for the next. None stands alone.

Seeing the whole landscape does not shorten the journey. It simply helps us recognize that each movement has its own purpose and that no season need be rushed.

Understanding the larger picture does not eliminate uncertainty, but it often replaces unnecessary anxiety with quiet confidence. When congregations know where they are in the process, they are better able to embrace each movement with patience instead of haste.

The first movement is preparation.

Like travelers taking a final look before beginning, congregations benefit from becoming spiritually and relationally ready before taking the next faithful step.

For Conversation

Which movement feels most familiar to your congregation?

Which movement do you think may require the greatest attention?

What do you hope your congregation will gain by seeing the whole journey before focusing on individual movements?

How might this overview reduce anxiety and strengthen confidence?

As you look across the journey ahead, where do you most hope to recognize the Holy Spirit's presence?

Along the Journey Together

Ending Well

Every new beginning asks us to leave something behind.

That is as true for congregations as it is for individuals.

Before anyone can embrace a new season, there is first a season that deserves to be honored. Something familiar is drawing to a close. Something meaningful is being entrusted to memory.

When a pastor retires, accepts another call, or concludes a season of ministry, a congregation naturally begins looking toward the future. Questions about the search arise almost immediately.

Who will come next?

How long will it take?

What happens now?

Those are understandable questions.

Faithful transitions, however, invite a different question first.

How do we bring this chapter of ministry to a faithful close?

Healthy endings are not about lingering in the past.

They are about giving thanks for the ways Christ has been present through a shared ministry. They create space to celebrate relationships that have been formed, ministries that have flourished, lives that have been touched, and quiet moments of grace that have shaped the congregation in ways few people fully recognize.

They also make room for honesty.

Every ministry carries both joy and disappointment. Some hopes have been fulfilled. Others remain unfinished. Gratitude may be accompanied by regret, excitement by sadness, hope by uncertainty.

Healthy endings make room for all of it.

Grief is not evidence that a congregation is unprepared for the future.

More often, it is evidence that people have loved one another well.

Only what has mattered deeply is deeply mourned.

Ending well also means establishing healthy boundaries.

One pastor's ministry must be allowed to conclude so another's can truly begin.

That requires care from everyone involved. Pastors, sessions, congregational leaders, and members each have a role in creating an ending that honors the past while making room for the future.

These boundaries are not expressions of distance.

They are acts of love.

They free both pastor and congregation to enter the next chapter with integrity rather than remaining caught between two seasons of ministry.

Congregations often discover that this movement takes longer than expected.

That should not be surprising.

Relationships worthy of gratitude are rarely concluded quickly.

The companion Ending Well Field Guide explores this movement more fully, offering practical guidance for pastors, sessions, and congregations as they navigate the spiritual, emotional, and relational work of saying goodbye faithfully.

Healthy beginnings grow from faithful endings.

Congregations that take time to express gratitude, acknowledge grief, and bless one another often discover that they receive the future with greater openness and less comparison.

Only after we have honored the chapter that is ending are we ready to prepare for beginnings that have been taking shape as God moves ahead of us preparing for something new.

For Conversation

As this season of ministry comes to a close, what are you most grateful for?

What emotions are present within your congregation, and how might they be acknowledged with honesty and compassion?

What conversations, celebrations, or expressions of gratitude would help your congregation end this chapter faithfully?

How can healthy boundaries create space for both your departing pastor and your future pastor to flourish?

As you prepare to bless one another and move into a new season, what do you pray God will carry forward from this chapter of your congregation's life?

Along the Journey Together

Preparing

Every meaningful journey begins long before anyone takes the first step.

Experienced travelers do not simply set out. They prepare themselves for the road ahead. They gather what they need, learn something about the landscape, and begin with an understanding of where they are going.

Congregational transitions deserve the same kind of preparation.

It is easy to assume that preparation is primarily about becoming organized.

Certainly there are practical tasks that require attention. Leadership must be identified. Responsibilities clarified. Timelines established. Communication planned.

Those things matter.

They simply are not the heart of preparation.

The deeper work is helping a congregation understand the season it is entering.

People are naturally less anxious when they know what to expect. They participate more fully when they understand why the process unfolds as it does. They become more patient when they recognize that faithful discernment cannot be hurried without losing something essential.

Preparation is not simply about getting ready to search for a pastor.

It is about preparing to listen, to reflect, to pray, and to walk together with openness to where the Holy Spirit may lead.

Preparation also invites a congregation to consider who will help guide the process.

Some congregations already have leaders with the gifts to facilitate healthy conversations. Others discover that an experienced guide from outside the congregation can create the space needed for honest dialogue and thoughtful discernment.

A facilitator's role is never to direct the congregation's decisions.

Instead, a facilitator creates conditions in which the congregation can hear one another more clearly. By encouraging broad participation, asking thoughtful questions, navigating difficult conversations, and helping people remain attentive to the work before them, a facilitator helps wisdom emerge from the community rather than being imposed upon it.

Whether a congregation works with a facilitator or not, the purpose remains the same:

To prepare people for the work ahead rather than simply preparing the paperwork.

Congregations that invest time in preparation often discover that everything which follows becomes less reactive and more reflective. Expectations become clearer. Relationships grow stronger. People understand not only what they are doing, but why each movement matters.

Healthy preparation is less about becoming organized than about becoming spiritually and relationally ready.

No amount of planning removes every uncertainty.

But thoughtful preparation enables a congregation to meet uncertainty with confidence instead of fear, curiosity instead of urgency, and trust instead of the need to control every outcome.

Preparation does not shorten the process.

It helps a congregation begin together—attentive to one another and expectant that the Holy Spirit has already gone before them.

Soon the practical work of transition will become visible.

Before that happens, however, the congregation is invited into its first deeply human work: honoring what its story. Faithful beginnings take root in a story that is larger than this moment of transition.

For Conversation

What do people in your congregation most need to understand before this journey begins?

Which expectations would be most helpful to clarify now rather than later?

What kinds of leadership and guidance will best help your congregation travel this journey faithfully?

In what ways can your congregation prepare spiritually as well as practically for the work ahead?

As you prepare to begin, what do you pray the Holy Spirit will cultivate within your congregation?

Along the Journey Together

Remembering

Every community carries a story.

Before travelers decide where the next path will lead, they often pause to remember where they have already been. The miles behind them have shaped the travelers they have become.

Congregations are no different.

After saying goodbye to one season of ministry, it is natural for stories to surface. Long-time members recall moments that newer members have never heard. Milestones are celebrated. Challenges are remembered. People laugh together, grieve together, and rediscover experiences that have quietly shaped the congregation through the years.

These conversations are about far more than nostalgia.

They are acts of remembering.

Remembering helps a congregation rediscover its identity.

Every congregation has a story unlike any other. Across the years, values have become woven into its common life. Particular ministries have reflected its deepest convictions. Relationships have shaped its culture. Successes have encouraged it. Disappointments have humbled it. Through every season, the Holy Spirit has patiently formed a community that has never existed before and will never exist again.

Remembering allows a congregation to receive those gifts with fresh gratitude.

It also broadens the way faithfulness is measured.

Attendance, budgets, and buildings tell part of the story.

They never tell the whole story.

The deeper story is found in lives that have been changed, friendships that have endured, acts of compassion quietly offered, children who have grown into disciples, neighbors who have found belonging, and countless moments of grace that will never appear in an annual report yet have shaped the congregation's witness for generations.

Remembering also offers perspective.

Every congregation has passed through seasons of uncertainty before. At the time, those moments may have seemed overwhelming. Looking back often reveals something that could not be seen while living through them.

God was faithful then.

That memory becomes quiet courage for the present.

Faithful remembering also makes room for honesty.

Not every chapter has been joyful. Congregations carry disappointments, unresolved differences, missed opportunities, and seasons they would never choose to repeat. Remembering neither ignores those experiences nor allows them to become the defining story.

Instead, it asks a different question:

What has God been teaching us through all of it?

Approached with humility, even painful memories become part of the wisdom a congregation carries into its future.

Healthy remembering is never about preserving the past.

Neither is it about escaping from it.

It is about carrying forward the gifts God has entrusted to the congregation while remaining open to the new possibilities the Holy Spirit continues to reveal.

Remembering is not an exercise in looking backward.

It is a way of seeing the present more clearly.

When congregations know who they have become, they are better prepared to discern who God is inviting them to become next.

The companion Remembering Field Guide explores practices that help congregations uncover the deeper story beneath dates, events, and milestones. Through storytelling, reflection, and shared conversation, congregations often discover that their history contains resources for the future they had never before recognized.

Having remembered the story that has shaped them, congregations are ready to notice the story unfolding around them.

The movement now shifts from remembering to listening—not only to one another, but also to neighbors, community, and the quiet movement of the Holy Spirit already at work beyond the congregation's walls.

For Conversation

As you remember your congregation's story, which moments immediately come to mind, and why do they still matter?

What values or convictions have consistently shaped your congregation through different seasons of ministry?

What gifts from your history do you believe God is asking you to carry into the future?

Looking back, where do you now recognize God's faithfulness in ways you may not have seen at the time?

As you remember your congregation's story, what hope do you sense God awakening for the journey that still lies ahead?

As you remember your congregation's story, what hope do you sense God awakening for the journey that still lies ahead?

Along the Journey Together

Listening

Having remembered its own story, the congregation is ready to widen its attention.

Every congregation is rooted in a particular place.

Neighborhoods change.

Communities evolve.

New people arrive carrying different experiences, hopes, and questions. Long-time residents grow older. Young families settle in. Schools change. Businesses open and close. Economic realities shift. New needs emerge, while strengths quietly develop that many people have yet to recognize.

The community a congregation serves today is rarely the same community it served even a few years ago.

Faithful ministry begins by noticing that reality.

Healthy congregations understand they cannot faithfully love a community they no longer understand.

Listening is how they begin to understand again.

The first movement of listening happens within the congregation itself.

People carry hopes for the future.

They also carry concerns, questions, disappointments, and dreams that deserve to be heard with respect. Creating opportunities for honest conversation strengthens trust and reminds the congregation that discernment belongs to the whole Body of Christ, not simply to its elected leaders.

Listening begins by hearing one another.

It does not end there.

Congregations are also invited to listen beyond their own walls.

To neighbors.

Teachers.

Business owners.

Community leaders.

First responders.

Healthcare workers.

Parents.

Young adults.

Long-time residents.

Newcomers.

People who have never entered the church's doors.

Each sees the community from a different vantage point.

Together they reveal a richer picture of the place God has entrusted to the congregation's care.

Listening also means paying attention to the community itself.

Where is life flourishing?

Where are people struggling?

What relationships are already creating hope?

What gifts are waiting to be recognized?

What possibilities are quietly emerging?

Questions like these shift a congregation from making assumptions to cultivating understanding.

Listening requires humility.

It asks congregations to become curious before becoming certain.

Rather than arriving with solutions already in hand, they begin with questions. Rather than assuming they know what their neighbors need, they learn to recognize what is already present, what is changing, and where the Holy Spirit may already be bringing people together.

That final question changes everything.

The purpose of listening is not simply to identify needs.

Needs matter.

But congregations that see only needs often overlook the gifts already present within a community. Every neighborhood contains wisdom, resilience, creativity, compassion,

and hope. Faithful listening learns to recognize those gifts as readily as it notices brokenness.

Deep listening rarely produces immediate answers.

Instead, it reshapes the questions.

Congregations often discover that as they listen more attentively, old assumptions quietly fall away. New relationships begin to form. Possibilities emerge that no strategic plan could have predicted because they arise from paying close attention to the people and place God has already given them.

Listening is not another task to complete before calling a pastor.

It is one of the enduring practices of a healthy congregation.

Churches that continue listening long after a new pastor arrives remain attentive to the movement of the Holy Spirit within both congregation and community. Listening becomes less a stage in a transition than a way of life.

The companion Listening Field Guide explores this movement in greater depth through community conversations, demographic exploration, appreciative inquiry, neighborhood engagement, and intentional listening with people whose voices are not often heard.

The more attentively a congregation listens—to one another, to its neighbors, and to its community—the more clearly it begins to recognize where God is already preparing the ground for new ministry.

Only then does another question begin to emerge.

Not simply,

"Who should be our next pastor?"

But,

"What kind of leader will help us join the work God is already inviting us to do?"

That question naturally leads into the work of calling new leadership.

For Conversation

Whose voices within your congregation are already being heard well? Whose voices might still need to be invited into the conversation?

What changes have you noticed in your community that deserve deeper attention?

Where do you already see signs of hope, resilience, or unexpected gifts within your neighborhood?

How might listening reshape the way your congregation imagines both its future ministry and its next pastor?

As your congregation seeks to listen more deeply, what do you pray the Holy Spirit will help you notice that you might otherwise overlook?

Along the Journey Together

Developing the Ministry Discernment Profile

At first glance, the Ministry Discernment Profile appears to be another document.

It asks for information about the congregation, its ministry, its community, and the gifts sought in the next pastor. It can easily feel like another administrative task to complete before the search can move forward.

Healthy congregations soon discover it is much more than that.

The Ministry Discernment Profile is not simply a form.

It is the congregation's opportunity to tell the truth about itself.

More importantly, it is an opportunity to bear witness to the future the Holy Spirit is inviting it to embrace.

Everything that has come before prepares the congregation for this moment.

Preparation has helped people understand the season they are entering.

Ending Well has created space for a new beginning.

Remembering has renewed the congregation's sense of identity.

Listening has deepened its understanding of both congregation and community.

Calling New Leadership has clarified the practice of discernment.

Now those discoveries begin to find their voice.

The Ministry Discernment Profile becomes the place where the congregation gives words to what it has been learning throughout the transition.

A thoughtful profile does far more than describe programs, committees, or responsibilities.

It reveals the congregation's character.

It tells the story of a people who know where they have been, understand the place they have been called to serve, and are beginning to recognize the future toward which God is leading them.

It reflects not only what the congregation does.

It reflects who the congregation is becoming.

That distinction matters.

Congregations are often tempted to write the profile they think pastors want to read.

They describe an idealized church.

They minimize challenges.

They emphasize strengths while quietly overlooking the places where growth is still needed.

Authenticity is far more compelling than perfection.

Pastors are not searching for flawless congregations.

They are seeking communities where they can faithfully live out their own calling.

The strongest Ministry Discernment Profiles are marked by honesty.

They celebrate gifts without exaggeration.

They acknowledge challenges without discouragement.

They describe hopes without pretending every answer is already known.

That kind of honesty creates trust before the first conversation ever takes place.

The Ministry Discernment Profile also serves prospective pastors.

As pastors read a congregation's story, they are discerning their own call.

They are quietly asking:

Can I imagine serving this congregation?

Do my gifts complement the future they are beginning to see?

Can we recognize God's call together?

The profile therefore becomes much more than information.

It becomes an invitation.

An invitation for congregation and pastor alike to begin imagining a shared future before they ever meet.

Writing the profile often takes longer than expected.

Not because the questions are especially difficult.

But because giving words to a congregation's identity, vocation, and hope requires patient reflection.

The conversations that shape the profile are often as valuable as the profile itself.

As people listen to one another, they frequently discover greater clarity about the congregation's purpose and renewed confidence in the future God is opening before them.

The companion *Developing the Ministry Discernment Profile Field Guide* explores this movement in greater depth, offering practical guidance for interpreting every section of the profile, engaging the congregation in meaningful reflection, and writing with honesty, clarity, and hope.

The Ministry Discernment Profile is not simply a description of a congregation.

It is a testimony to its discernment.

It bears witness to who the congregation believes God is calling it to become and invites prospective pastors to consider whether their own vocation may become part of that unfolding story.

With those words now shared, the search enters its most personal stage.

Conversation becomes relationship.

Discernment becomes partnership.

And congregation and pastor begin discovering what ministry together might become.

For Conversation

If someone knew nothing about your congregation, what would you most hope they would understand after reading your Ministry Discernment Profile?

How can your profile communicate not only what your congregation has done but who it is becoming?

Where might your congregation be tempted to present an idealized picture of itself rather than an honest one?

How can the process of writing the profile strengthen your congregation's own sense of identity and vocation?

As you prepare this profile, what wisdom, humility, and hope do you pray the Holy Spirit will cultivate among those entrusted with this work?

Along the Journey Together

Interviewing and Mutual Discernment

The Ministry Discernment Profile has been written.

Pastor Discernment Profiles have been received.

Now the conversation becomes personal.

Until this point, much of the congregation's work has been one of reflection. It has sought to understand its own story, its community, and the future to which God may be calling it.

Now those discoveries are placed alongside another person's story.

For many congregations, interviews feel like the moment the search truly begins.

In reality, they continue the work that has been unfolding all along.

Interviews are often understood as opportunities to evaluate candidates.

Faithful congregations discover they are something much deeper.

They are conversations of mutual discernment.

The Pastor Nominating Committee certainly has questions to ask. It wants to understand a pastor's experience, theology, leadership, relationships, and sense of vocation.

Those questions matter.

But interviews are not examinations.

They are opportunities to discover whether two stories may be drawn together into one shared ministry.

Discernment always flows in both directions.

The congregation is asking whether this pastor's gifts and vocation resonate with the future it has begun to recognize.

The pastor is asking equally important questions.

Can I imagine loving these people?

Can I see my vocation taking root in this place?

Will my gifts help this congregation become more fully who God is calling it to be?

Can we faithfully serve Christ together?

Neither pastor nor congregation is trying to persuade the other.

Both are seeking to recognize the movement of the Holy Spirit.

That changes the character of every conversation.

Mutual discernment requires honesty.

It invites both congregation and pastor to speak truthfully about their hopes, their challenges, their questions, and even their uncertainties.

Neither serves the other by pretending.

Authenticity creates the trust upon which healthy ministry is built.

As interviews continue, something begins to change.

A résumé becomes a person.

A Ministry Discernment Profile becomes a community.

Stories are exchanged.

Laughter is shared.

Questions become conversations.

Conversations begin to build relationship.

That quiet transformation matters.

The purpose is never to find a perfect pastor.

Neither is it to become the perfect congregation.

It is to recognize whether God may be weaving two vocations together for the sake of Christ's ministry in this particular place.

This movement requires patience.

Additional interviews may be needed.

References are prayerfully considered.

The Pastor Nominating Committee listens carefully to one another, reflects together, and remains attentive to the quiet wisdom that often emerges over time.

Discernment is rarely hurried.

It matures through prayer, conversation, trust, and time.

The companion Interviewing and Mutual Discernment Field Guide explores this movement in greater depth, offering practical guidance for preparing thoughtful interviews, conducting reference checks, planning candidate visits, engaging the congregation appropriately, and cultivating practices of prayerful discernment throughout the process.

Eventually there comes a moment when conversation gives way to recognition.

What first appeared as possibility begins to feel like calling.

The question is no longer simply,

"Could we serve together?"

It gradually becomes,

"Is God calling us to serve together?"

When congregation and pastor begin answering that question with growing confidence, they are ready for the final act of discernment.

The call.

For Conversation

How can interviews become conversations of discernment rather than evaluations of performance?

What qualities of character, relationships, and vocation matter as much as experience and skills?

How can your Pastor Nominating Committee create space for honest conversation and mutual listening?

What practices of prayer and reflection will help your committee remain attentive to the Holy Spirit throughout the interview process?

As your congregation and future pastor seek one another, what do you pray both will recognize about God's call?

Along the Journey Together

Calling New Leadership

For many congregations, this is the moment they have anticipated from the very beginning.

The Pastor Nominating Committee has been elected.

The Ministry Discernment Profile has been written.

Pastor Discernment Profiles begin to arrive.

Conversations become interviews.

The search is underway.

From the outside, it may appear that the real work of transition has finally begun.

In truth, it has been unfolding all along.

By the time a congregation reaches this point, something important has already happened.

It has prepared itself for the journey.

It has brought one season of ministry to a faithful close.

It has remembered the story that has shaped its life together.

It has listened—to one another, to its neighbors, and to the community God has entrusted to its care.

Those movements quietly transform the questions the congregation now asks.

Instead of asking,

"Who is the best pastor?"

the congregation begins asking,

"Whose gifts, experience, and sense of vocation resonate with the future God is inviting us to embrace?"

That is a profoundly different question.

It changes the character of the search.

The Ministry Discernment Profile becomes more than a description of the congregation.

Interviews become conversations about calling rather than examinations of qualifications.

The Pastor Nominating Committee listens as carefully as it asks questions.

Discernment gradually replaces evaluation.

Healthy search committees understand they are not choosing an employee.

Nor are they searching for someone who can solve every challenge the congregation faces.

They are participating in the mutual discernment of a call.

Just as the congregation is seeking to recognize God's invitation, so are prospective pastors.

They are quietly asking:

Can I imagine giving my life to this community?

Do my gifts complement what God is already doing here?

Can we faithfully serve Christ together?

The search, therefore, is never one-sided.

It is a shared act of listening.

Because this movement carries so much hope, it often carries anxiety as well.

Congregations naturally wonder whether they will find the "right" pastor.

Search committees sometimes feel pressure to make the perfect decision.

Those concerns are understandable.

Faithful ministry, however, has never depended upon perfection.

It grows through shared purpose, honest relationships, mutual trust, and a willingness to continue discerning together long after the call has been accepted.

Searching also requires patience.

That can be difficult.

The excitement of finally reaching this stage often creates a desire to move quickly.

Yet waiting is not empty time.

Again and again throughout Scripture, waiting becomes one of the ways God prepares people to receive what they could not yet recognize.

The same is often true during a pastoral search.

Time allows conversations to deepen.

It creates space for prayer.

It gives both congregation and pastor the opportunity to discover whether they are truly being invited into a shared future.

The companion Calling New Leadership Field Guide explores this movement in greater depth, from writing an effective Ministry Discernment Profile and conducting interviews to evaluating Pastor Discernment Profiles, checking references, and practicing mutual discernment throughout the search process.

Calling a pastor is one of the most visible moments in a pastoral transition.

It is also one of the most hopeful.

Not because every uncertainty has disappeared.

But because congregation and pastor begin to recognize that God may be weaving their stories together into a new chapter of shared ministry.

The purpose of the search is not to discover a perfect pastor.

It is to recognize a faithful partner whose gifts, experience, and vocation complement the congregation's calling and the future the Holy Spirit is already unfolding.

When that call is accepted, the work of discernment does not end.

A new relationship is only beginning.

The next movement invites pastor and congregation to discover how trust is built, partnerships are formed, and shared ministry grows over time.

For Conversation

How has your congregation's preparation, remembering, and listening shaped the way you now think about pastoral leadership?

What gifts and qualities seem most important for the ministry God is calling your congregation toward?

What expectations might your congregation need to examine before beginning conversations with prospective pastors?

How can your Pastor Nominating Committee practice discernment rather than simply evaluation throughout the search?

As your congregation and future pastor seek one another, what do you pray both will recognize about God's call?

As you prepare to begin this new chapter together, what do you pray God will nurture through your shared ministry?

Along the Journey Together

Beginning Ministry Together

The pastor has arrived.

Boxes have been unpacked.

Names are beginning to sound familiar.

The first sermons have been preached.

The first meetings have been held.

It is tempting to believe the transition is complete.

In many ways, however, it has only entered its most important season.

Calling a pastor begins a relationship.

It does not complete one.

After months of preparation, reflection, remembering, listening, discernment, and calling, pastor and congregation begin the patient work of becoming partners in ministry.

That work cannot be hurried.

Like every meaningful relationship, it develops over time.

The early months are filled with discovery.

The congregation is learning the pastor's gifts, rhythms, and ways of leading.

The pastor is learning names, stories, traditions, hopes, and the unique culture of the congregation.

Together they are learning the community they have been called to serve.

This is holy work.

It asks for patience.

Curiosity.

Humility.

Grace.

The temptation at the beginning of a new ministry is understandable.

Congregations sometimes hope the new pastor will quickly address long-standing concerns or launch fresh initiatives.

Pastors may feel pressure to demonstrate effectiveness by introducing new ideas or creating immediate momentum.

Wisdom usually invites something different.

The strongest beginnings are rooted in relationships before results.

Trust grows through ordinary moments.

Shared worship.

Hospital visits.

Committee meetings.

Coffee after worship.

Serving alongside one another.

Keeping promises.

Showing up.

Over time, these quiet acts of faithfulness become the foundation upon which enduring ministry is built.

Healthy beginnings are also marked by curiosity.

Every congregation carries stories that cannot be learned from minutes, reports, or histories.

Every pastor brings experiences that have shaped how ministry is understood and practiced.

The first months provide an opportunity for pastor and congregation to become students of one another.

Questions become more valuable than assumptions.

Listening remains more important than immediate solutions.

Both pastor and congregation also bring expectations into the relationship.

Some are spoken.

Many are not.

Previous experiences—joyful and painful alike—quietly shape how people interpret new situations.

Naming those expectations with honesty and grace often prevents misunderstandings before they have an opportunity to take root.

Hospitality also takes on deeper meaning during this season.

It is expressed not only through receptions and welcome events, but through patience, encouragement, forgiveness, openness, and a willingness to learn together.

Congregations welcome a new pastor by making room for new relationships to develop naturally.

Pastors welcome a congregation by honoring its story before attempting to shape its future.

Both become partners in creating the trust upon which faithful ministry depends.

The companion Beginning Ministry Together Field Guide explores this movement in greater depth, offering practical guidance for building healthy relationships, clarifying expectations, cultivating trust, navigating the first year of ministry, and developing patterns of shared leadership that can sustain ministry for years to come.

Perhaps the greatest misunderstanding about pastoral transitions is believing they end when a pastor accepts a call.

In truth, the transition continues until pastor and congregation have learned to trust one another, share a common purpose, and recognize themselves as partners in Christ's ministry.

Only then has the deeper work of transition been fulfilled.

Looking back across the journey, it becomes clear that every movement has been preparing for this one.

Preparation cultivated readiness.

Ending Well taught gratitude and faithful release.

Remembering renewed identity.

Listening nurtured attentiveness.

Developing the Ministry Discernment Profile gave voice to vocation.

Interviewing and Mutual Discernment helped congregation and pastor recognize a shared call.

Calling New Leadership affirmed that call with joy and hope.

Now those practices become woven into the everyday life of the congregation.

The transition has accomplished something far greater than calling a pastor.

It has helped a congregation learn how to discern together.

That may prove to be the most enduring gift of the entire journey.

Pastoral transitions eventually come to an end.

The life of the congregation does not.

The practices cultivated along the way—preparing thoughtfully, ending faithfully, remembering honestly, listening deeply, discerning prayerfully, building trusting relationships, and growing together in shared ministry—continue to strengthen a congregation long after the search is complete.

They become habits of discipleship.

They shape the congregation's witness.

They prepare God's people not only for the next transition but for every new invitation the Holy Spirit places before them.

The destination was never simply a new pastor.

It was always a congregation becoming more attentive to God's presence, more responsive to God's call, and more faithful in joining Christ's work in the world.

The future now belongs to pastor and congregation, who together continue joining the work Christ is already doing in their place.

Navigating Pastoral Transition Field Guide Series

Pastoral transition is not a single event but a series of movements, each inviting its own kind of discernment. This overview introduces the journey as a whole. The companion Field Guides explore each movement in greater depth, offering practical tools, theological reflection, conversation resources, and guidance for pastors, sessions, Pastor Nominating Committees, facilitators, and congregational leaders.

Series Overview

Navigating Pastoral Transition — An overview of the entire transition journey.

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Ending Well — Honoring ministries, expressing gratitude, grieving faithfully, and establishing healthy boundaries.

Preparing — Becoming spiritually, relationally, and organizationally ready

Remembering — Rediscovering congregational identity through story.

Listening — Learning to hear the congregation, the community, and the Holy Spirit with fresh attentiveness.

Developing the Ministry Discernment Profile — Articulating the congregation's identity, vocation, and hopes with clarity and honesty.

Calling New Leadership — Practicing mutual discernment throughout the pastoral search, including interviewing, hosting, calling, and receiving new pastors

Beginning Ministry Together — Building trust, partnership, and shared ministry during the first years of a new call.

Additional Field Guides are planned as the series continues to grow.