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The Art of Caring for Your New Pastor

Advice for churches in a time of transition



Because I am a pastor in transition, I have been thinking about a sermon series I heard decades ago. At the time I was an associate pastor, and in the absence of a senior minister our congregation hired an interim to supply the preaching. He preached an excellent series on how to care for the next pastor, and as I listened, I realized he was offering a gift to an unknown pastor by saying things that the next pastor would never be able to say.

The window of departure and interims is small, and many congregations have never heard a sermon series like the one I heard. What I do know is that the art of caring for your pastor benefits everybody. When the pastor is cared for, the benefits come back to the congregation in many ways, and also extend into the community and beyond. Here is the list as I remember it, along with a few items of my own.

Be your pastor's friend. This can happen by inviting him or her into your home, doing fun things together like seeing a movie, going fishing, going to a concert, or just inviting your pastor over to play a game or watch TV. Remember, your new pastor has not had years to build friendships in your congregation or community, so your friendship will be valued.

Express appreciation on a regular basis. Just like you, your pastor needs to know that his or her efforts are appreciated, even though your pastor comes to you with a servant's heart. Expressing authentic appreciation is

an important way to encourage your pastor, which benefits everybody.

Take interest in your pastor's family. Get to know the names of your pastor's family members, and ask about them. Take note of birthdays, anniversaries, and other events, remembering that by God's design, you are very much like an extended family to your pastor, especially since your pastor's biological family may be miles away.

Encourage your pastor to take breaks. It is to the church's and your pastor's benefit that he or she gets away. Yes, it is the Lord's work, but Jesus himself modeled personal times away from ministry pressures. When the pastor is serving diligently, make sure he or she plays just as hard. "All work and no play," as the saying goes, benefits nobody.

Help your pastor build financial equity. Remember, especially if you offer a parsonage, that your pastor needs home equity for retirement. One day he or she will retire and it will be too late to start purchasing a home. Offer a mutually agreeable plan by which your pastor can build equity while living in your parsonage or receive assistance to purchase a home.

Refuse to gossip about your pastor. Dissecting your pastor over Sunday dinner is wrong, and your children will learn it from you. Gossip is a way of life for some people, but it should never characterize the life of a believer. Refuse to practice such behavior.

Go directly to your pastor with any concerns. Your church officers are not elected to carry your concerns to the pastor while you remain anonymous. Yes, it is difficult, but in Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus tells us to address our concerns face to face. Honest conversation, accompanied by forgiveness, could actually deepen your relationship.

Provide adequately for your pastor's financial needs. Your pastor has come to serve you. Freedom from financial worry and the obligation to find ways to supplement a low salary will enhance your pastor's ministry, which benefits everyone. Even in difficult financial times, the church can look for other creative ways to say, "We can't do more financially, but here is something tangible we can do to let you know we appreciate you."

Pray regularly for your pastor. Pastoring the church is a calling, not a job, and it is a calling that brings fierce spiritual opposition. Put your pastor and family on your prayer list, for their well-being and that of the entire congregation.

This list is not exhaustive, but it does address some crucial issues. The important thing is that *you* actually care for your pastor rather than assuming it is being done by someone else. The benefits will accrue for your pastor, your pastor's family, for you and the entire congregation, and for the total ministry your church will have in the community and beyond. ■

As of last month, **Alan E. Johnson** is pastor of Urban Heights Covenant Church in Urbandale, Iowa.