

Making the Most of Pastoral Transitions

by Cam Taylor, Director of Outreach Canada's Transitional Leadership Ministries

"It isn't the changes that do you in, it's the transitions." In terms of pastoral transitions, a change of pastors followed by a healthy transition can make all the difference. William Bridges in his book *Managing Transitions - Making the Most of Change*, sees *change* as situational and *transition* as the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Unless transition occurs, change will not work. A change in pastors does not automatically mean that any significant changes will take place unless there is a transitional process that accompanies that change.

There are three stages in the transition process. There is the ending, the neutral zone and then a new beginning.

Transition starts with an ending. When pastors leave a church, it is important to acknowledge that an ending has taken place. There must be a letting go in the same way that *Israel had to let go of Egypt as the first step in their transition to the promised land.*

Once letting go takes place, there is a move into the neutral zone or the wilderness. This is that no-man's-land between the old reality and the new yet to be experienced reality. It is a time when the old way is being left behind yet the new way is not yet comfortable or fully realized. Understanding this "zone" can be a powerful gift for those confused by change or in a rush to get through to the Promised Land.

In the words of Marilyn Ferguson, "*It's not so much that we're afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, but it's that place in between that we fear...It's like being between trapezes. It's Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There's nothing to hold on to.*" Churches in transition need reassurance from wise transitional leaders and intentional interim pastors that the wilderness is necessary and a part of God's plan for their health and future kingdom impact.

After the letting go and the neutral zone comes the new beginning. People make the new beginning only if they have made an ending and spend some time in the wilderness. The timing of the new beginning is like the timing of a flower coming to full bloom. It cannot be forced but comes naturally at just the right time. Churches navigating through a season of transition travel through their ending and wilderness in different ways and on different time tables but will with patience arrive at the other end ready for what is next.

To borrow some wisdom from Bridges, he suggests several things that can help people see the new beginning from a ways off and be properly prepared for their own healthy transition. The best person to help bring this perspective is a transitional leader, intentional interim or coach who knows what you are experiencing. The voice of wisdom would give the following advice: 1) Explain the purpose behind the outcome you seek; 2) Paint a picture of how the outcome will look and feel; 3) lay out a step-by-step plan for phasing in the outcome; and 4) give each person a part to play in both the plan and the outcome. With the right tour guide and map, change does not have to be the enemy but can become your friend as you transition to an ending, through the neutral zone and into the new beginning.