

Pastoral Transitions: Due Diligence

John R. Cionca, Ph.D.

Ten months ago an east coast pastor asked his board if he was still the right person to lead their flock. He had been serving the congregation for 19 years, but they'd been struggling over the past three years. The board went away on a two-day retreat to pray for their minister and the church. They returned and informed the pastor that they sensed the Spirit was saying that it was time for new leadership in the church. On the surface he handled the news well, but internally he was shocked. At age 61 he questioned: "What will I do; where will I go?"

Over the following months all the stages of grief and loss were experienced by pastor and spouse. And while intellectually he recognized the need to move on, emotionally he, and especially his wife, felt abandoned. Nevertheless, while some pastoral tenures end in an ugly fashion, both church and minister handled this exit with class. An evening for celebration, a card shower (with gifts encouraged) and a more than generous transitions gift (severance package) were provided. The board even provided several months of professional counseling and career guidance.

A consultant friend of mine believes "the average pastor stays two years too long." By the time the minister figures out that he or she has lost their effectiveness, a turn-around under their leadership is unlikely. I remember sitting in the living room with a clergy couple hearing the minister lament: "John, I don't know what I can do the next five years that I haven't tried the past five years." This minister followed a founding pastor who had loved and served that congregation for twenty-five years—and had remained in the congregation (a topic for another article). Several hundred people had left the church under this new pastor's leadership. My response to his confession was: "Ted, perhaps you need to release the church to someone else who may be able to move it forward." Unfortunately, unlike the story above, this pastor left grudgingly, and years later still has a bitter spirit over his forced exit.

On a more positive note let me relate the story of another pastor who seems to transition at just the right time. He served for fifteen years in New England, then 15 years in the mid-west. Even though his ministry was flourishing in a suburb of Chicago, at age 52 he realized that he either had to remain at his present church until retirement, or he had to transition now. He figured: "I can put in 15 years in another church if I move now, but if I wait a few more years, the window may close. No one is looking for a 55+ year senior pastor." He accepted a call from a church in California, and is enjoying another fruitful season of service. Perhaps, not just in comedy, but also in ministry, "timing is everything!"

Sometimes I think we make the Christian life overly mystical. Sure, the Bible speaks of mystery, but it also illustrates simplicity. Although it affirms "the Lord determines [a person's] steps" (Proverbs 16:9 TNIV), it also assumes a sound decision-making process. Jesus said, "For which of you, intending to build a tower does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? . . . Or what king going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down and consider first whether he is able with 10,000 to oppose the one who comes against him with 20,000? (Luke 14:28, 31 NRSV).

Just as rationality is part of the image of God in us, making choices is as naturally human as breathing. People (including ministers) make decisions about what to wear, what type of car to drive, where to live and with whom to spend time. Among the weightiest decisions a pastor must make is whether to seek a new place of ministry.

So let me share with you twenty signals worth consideration by pastors who are wrestling with “should I stay or should I leave?” The more items in the “Red Light” category, the more reason to remain in one’s present congregation. The more responses cluster in the “Green Light” category, the more evidence a change may be in order. Where a pastor places himself or herself, and how much weight each factor is given, will shed light on the wisdom of a transition. None of the factors are a mandate to move. But they can bring insight into what is happening within the church and the pastor. They can serve as discussion points for good decision-making.

CONGREGATIONAL SIGNALS

RED LIGHT

Congregational Hunger
 Congregational Vulnerability
 Inadequate Lay Leadership
 Vibrancy and Growth
 Generous Giving

GREEN LIGHT

Congregational Apathy
 Congregational Stability
 Abundant Trained
 Leadership
 Stagnation and Decline
 Shortage of Finances

PERSONAL SIGNALS

RED LIGHT

Authenticity Accepted
 Good Giftedness Match
 Enthusiasm for the Task
 Challenging Work
 More Dreams and Visions
 Good Opportunity for Impact
 Family Happy and Growing
 Appropriate Compensation

GREEN LIGHT

Stifled Personality
 Poor Giftedness Match
 Restlessness or Withdrawal
 Job Mundane or
 Overwhelming
 Silence or Nightmares
 Limited Opportunity for
 Impact
 Family Distressed and Stifled
 Insufficient Compensation

PASTOR/PEOPLE SIGNALS

RED LIGHT

Good Socio-Cultural Fit
 Tenure Less than Six Years
 Compatibility with Staff
 High Integrity and Credibility
 Unity and Encouragement
 Annual Evaluation Affirms
 Ministry
 Advisors Confirm Ministry

GREEN LIGHT

Poor Socio-Cultural Fit
 Tenure More than Six Years
 Poor Staff or Key
 Relationships
 Low Integrity and Credibility
 Resistance and Conflict
 Board Requests Major
 Changes
 Advisors Suggest a Change

I wish I had time to unpack these signals for you, and I wish we had space to detail the scriptures that support them and the clergy examples that illustrate them. But for now, my hope is that pastors perform their due diligence in transitions. Yes, God sovereignly leads, but he also holds us accountable for decisions. The Apostle Paul acknowledged, “I labor, with his energy” (Colossians 1:29). So let’s serve with all our hearts, in the harvest fields that are whitest for the resources that God has specifically entrusted to each of us.

Dr. John Cionca, who is professor of ministry leadership at Bethel Seminary, wrote this article on behalf of North Central Ministry Development Center. His book is *Before You Move: A Guide to Making Transitions in Ministry*, Revised edition, available at Amazon.com.