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Date

Praxis of Pastoral Care:  
Helping a Congregation Navigate Grief and Change in Pastoral Transition

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## Abstract

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By Darin C. Hendrey

Every church will experience a pastoral change; for some, this will be rare; for others, it will be a frequent occurrence. Each time a pastor moves, retires, or resigns from ministry, the pastor and church will experience grief because when we lose something, we grieve. Churches that transition well allow pastors and congregations to work through their grief and experience healing through the transition process. Pastors and churches who do not take the time or acknowledge grief can develop a pattern of continually changing pastors, partly due to unresolved grief. After years of grief, churches can become numb to pastoral change and unwilling to fully invest in a new pastor's leadership, spiritual, and personal life. When churches become numb to their grief, there is a high risk of conflict with incoming pastors. This project aims to help incoming pastors, and church leaders understand and process their grief and, when conflict arises, have the tools to navigate the pastoral transition.

Praxis of Pastoral Care:  
Helping a Congregation Navigate Grief and Change in Pastoral Transition

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## *My Story*

In July of 2003, I was appointed to my first full-time ministry assignment in the United Methodist Church. This appointment was to four small, rural congregations in Indiana. Leading up to this appointment, I had several in-person and phone conversations with the outgoing pastor, discussing where the congregation is now, what needs they have for the future and potential conflict points that may arise in the transition. The outgoing pastor spent months introducing me to the congregation and encouraging them to embrace the differences between the two of us as pastors. When my family and I arrived, it was a wonderful welcome and acceptance for a newly graduated seminary student experiencing their first steps into full-time ordained ministry. As I experienced my new church family's love, grace, and acceptance, I knew I was called, and God had bestowed a blessing on me.

Little did I know at this time, the experience of a smooth change in pastors does not always take place, and years later, I would experience the challenges and trauma of a difficult pastoral transition. The traditional transition time for United Methodist clergy is to move in June and start a new appointment on July 1. However, there are numerous exceptions, and sometimes clergy need to make a mid-year move because of another person's health, death, or a case of abuse. In 2009 I was on track for this typical rotation.

In the spring of 2009, I was appointed to a new church and expected to begin my assignment on July 1. In the middle of May, my superintendent called to tell me the new church had split because they were angry at the Annual Conference for making their current pastor leave. I was told that my appointment at that church would no longer happen, that I would receive a new appointment after Annual Conference, and that I would begin the last Sunday of

July. This was most unusual. What I did not know at the time was that appointment would be my most challenging and complex ever.

In late July, my appointment began at a church at which I felt I was not qualified, gifted, or prepared to serve. I felt I had been assigned there simply because my original appointment had fallen through. I moved to a congregation that years earlier had been the result of the merger of two separate congregations. The Annual Conference took two dying and dysfunctional congregations and made a bigger dying dysfunctional congregation. When the two churches merged, both pastors remained, but as co-pastors. Naturally, each church believed their original pastor was the better of the two, which caused division. One pastor was United Methodist, and the other was an ordained Baptist serving a United Methodist Church. After a couple of years, the United Methodist pastor moved to a new church, and the Baptist pastor remained and served the combined congregation for ten years. After ten years, the bishop reassigned the Baptist pastor to another United Methodist Congregation, making way for my appointment to this church.

On my first Sunday, I walked into the church to find two women yelling at each other from different ends of the church. I don't know what the argument was about, but this was my first impression, and once I learned more that impression only became worse. In the first two weeks of my appointment, the secretary, children's minister, youth minister, music minister, and worship director all resigned, telling me that they had been there long enough and needed a break. So, I begin my ministry by needing to find entirely new staff. After the first month, a church member got into a conflict with the praise band, and all five members immediately quit. I also found out in a board meeting that the church was \$500,000 in debt and was struggling to repay the money. For me, perhaps the worst part of all this was that after a month the

congregation suddenly deemed all these problems to be my fault! At least that is how the leadership of this congregation perceived it, and because I was inexperienced, I believed it too.

My three years at this church bore fruit, and I developed some close relationships with people that I cherish and maintain to this day. However, those years were full of conflict and stress, and my family and I were miserable. Both my wife and I ended up in counseling because of how hateful and mean people were in the congregation. A three-hour meeting of the Staff Pastor Parish Relations Committee would typically entail someone reading through five pages of notes of all the things I was doing wrong. It was not unusual for a church member to confront my wife, standing nose to nose with her and yelling at her for no apparent reason.

After two years, I happened upon a newsletter article from 1912 written by a pastor of one of the original churches. That pastor lamented the church's problems, specifically its attitude, gossiping, and lack of desire to serve and love other people—essentially the same issues confronting me. It was then that I realized that the church's Spirit, DNA, or culture has always been one of conflict. In short, the problems were not all my fault, and if I had had some experience and tools to handle what I was facing, things might have turned out differently for me—and them. Because of my experience in a difficult clergy transition I have done much work on understanding the complexities of clergy transition, developing skills to do transitions well, and applied these learnings to future appointments in the United Methodist Church.

### **Clergy Transition Trends in the United States**

Clergy in all faith traditions eventually move (or die!), prompting the church they leave to seek a new pastor. In an appointive system, such as that of The United Methodist Church of which I am a full member, pastors are appointed by a bishop or other judicatory leader. In a congregational church, the congregation itself calls a pastor, usually after an extensive search

and interview process. Whether in a call or appointive system, pastoral transitions can be difficult. As an itinerant pastor who goes when and where sent, I have moved many times in my twenty-five years of ministry. Some of those transitions have gone well, and others have not. Some of this research is born out of what has gone well, but much from what has not, and learning the difficulty of pastoral change. One of the lessons I have learned over these many years is that both clergy and laity do not always handle pastoral change well.

Pastoral transition is a perpetual topic of discussion, but because of the recent pandemic, the numbers of those leaving the ministry seem to be increasing. According to a Barna pastor poll<sup>1</sup> done in November 2021, 38% of pastors considered quitting full-time ministry, which is up from 29% when pastors were asked the same question in January of 2021. Additionally, this survey indicated that 46% of pastors under 45 are considering quitting full-time ministry. How long a pastor stays in a particular congregation varies, but any congregation can have multiple pastors over the course of its history. Finding accurate and up-to-date statistics on clergy transitions is challenging. A 2020 Barna Group study indicated that 20,000 pastors left the ministry and 50 percent of current pastors say they would leave the church if they had another way of making a living. Currently, in the Indiana Conference, we do not need statistics to tell us we are short of clergy, with several full-time clergies taking on two and three churches to fulfill pastoral duties for those congregations. Yet this paper is not about the lack of clergy but about the difficulties of clergy transitions, and that these are increasing in number. Pastors need to be ready to take on new churches and responsibilities. Many of these churches may not be healthy or may be experiencing tremendous grief because their beloved pastor has left to another church, type of ministry, retired, or left ministry completely.

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<sup>1</sup> "38% of U.S. Pastors Have Thought About Quitting Full-Time Ministry in the Past Year," *Barna*, n.d., <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-well-being/>.



When a transition occurs, both clergy/clergy families and laity experience drastic changes; the clergy have to move to a new church and typically location and therefore home. Members of the clergy family often have to find new jobs and enroll in a different school system (if there is one), find new service providers like doctors and dentists, learn where to shop, and settle into their new community. Moments of transition can take a toll on clergy and family.

For its part, the congregation that loses its pastor has to either begin searching for their pastor or work with the Conference Superintendent or local judicatory representative to do so. Often, the local church has to go through a discernment process to identify their needs and find a clergyperson who will fit those needs. This can be time-consuming and frustrating for the laity because they want to get it right to experience less pastoral change.

Finally, when a church and pastor form a partnership, they both now must begin the process of understanding one another. The pastor has to learn the formal and informal leaders of the church, how the congregation traditionally worships, how it operates, and how to care for his/her new congregation. The congregation has to adjust to a new personality in their pastor, as well as preaching, teaching, and leadership style. There is an initial, incorrect thought that everyone knows everything, but this is far from the truth. The following parable demonstrates the challenges of pastoral transition.

A certain actor, with experience and training, was offered a most challenging test by a wise director. The actor was informed that he was to remain in the dressing room until the middle of the second act of a play he had never read or rehearsed. On a cue from the director, he was to walk on stage and begin to act. At the appropriate time, the cue was given, and the actor entered stage left. At first the scenery bore a slight resemblance to a set in which he had played a starring role. He immediately assumed that role, but the other actors on stage seemed confused and even irritated. He soon fell silent. He then noticed that some of the actors appeared to be dressed in costume similar to that used in another play in which he had had a major role. As he assumed that role, one of the actors left in disgust and another looked at him pityingly. After trying two or three other roles, familiar to him from the past, he concluded none of them quite suited the set, the costumes, or the lines being offered by the others on stage. He then stepped out of character and asked one of the actors if he could

be told what was going on. The other actors gathered round and each told him something of what had been the play's action to the point of his entrance. Well, what were you going to do when I came on stage, he asked? That the strange thing they said, we didn't have any more script. The story wasn't ended but we didn't know what was to happen next. Well, what am I supposed to do, asked the actor? One of the members of the cast suggested an answer. Perhaps with your experience and training you could help us find a satisfactory conclusion to the second act. They then began to work at their new task, and the curtain remained up. They went back over the story as it had unfolded in the first act. They laughed and enjoyed the pleasure of remembering the mistakes they had made and the deeply emotional moments in the scenes that had led up to the arrival of the new actor. They examined the scenery and the staging plan and decided that there were some clues in the context to suggest some future direction. The experienced actor reminded them of some of the major themes of love, reconciliation, justice, peace, compassion, forgiveness, judgment, and grace. The actors then took account of the people on stage and decided how they would continue to perform with some reshaping of their roles. They suggested lines to each other, and together they began to interact to the delight of everyone. The curtain fell to end the second act. When the curtain went up again, all the actors were on stage except the one who had entered in the middle of the second act. The cast seemed puzzled and a little disorganized, and then there appeared from stage left another experienced and well-trained actor. At first she assumed the character of a number of roles she had played elsewhere, but the cast seemed confused and slightly irritated. Eventually, however...<sup>2</sup>

### ***The bad and good of leadership transitions in the Bible***

Few people welcome change, including changing pastors or leaders of an organization. And yet that is our reality. Change occurs; leaders of organizations change, and pastors receive new callings. Churches traditionally are more resistant to change and would like things to stay the same because, in sameness, there is calm and peace—at least that is the perception. The reality is that pastoral transition and leadership change have been around for millennia. Scripture offers us two examples of leadership transition, one done well and the other not so well. One example of a leadership transition not done well is between King Saul and David. In 1 Samuel 9, the story of Israel's first kings is told. When God commissions Samuel to anoint the first king of Israel, he finds Saul to be a man who looks and acts the part of a king. Saul starts well as the first king but, in time, begins to show his weakness. There are many chapters and verses

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<sup>2</sup> William Bud Phillips, *Pastoral Transitions: From Endings to New Beginnings* (Virginia: Alban Institute, 1988), 66.

detailing the rise and fall of Saul, but the pivotal verse that started the leadership transition is 1

Samuel 15:24-28:

<sup>24</sup> Then Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned. I violated the LORD’s command and your instructions. I was afraid of the men and so I gave in to them. <sup>25</sup> Now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the LORD.” <sup>26</sup> But Samuel said to him, “I will not go back with you. You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you as king over Israel!” <sup>27</sup> As Samuel turned to leave, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore. <sup>28</sup> Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors—to one better than you.

The story turns to a soon-to-be anointed king named David. Saul did not go quietly, which resulted in a fifteen-year conflict between Saul and David that nearly destroyed the whole kingdom. Saul did not want to leave as king; he was jealous and intimidated by David’s success and sought to undermine and destroy David whenever he could. In speaking of organizational transition, specifically, church transition between pastors, Saul represents the pastor who wants to maintain control even after they have left, who does not have the emotional maturity to accept and celebrate the success of the following pastor. The Saul type pastor’s self-esteem is fueled by the accolades of his/her followers, and when they leave may not experience the same praise in another congregation.

Thankfully, we have more examples of leadership transition in scripture that are positive and fruitful, such as the change of leadership between Moses and Joshua, which is described in

Numbers 27:12-23:

<sup>12</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go up this mountain in the Abarim Range and see the land I have given the Israelites. <sup>13</sup> After you have seen it, you too will be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron was, <sup>14</sup> for when the community rebelled at the waters in the Desert of Zin, both of you disobeyed my command to honor me as holy before their eyes.” (These were the waters of Meribah Kadesh, in the Desert of Zin.) <sup>15</sup> Moses said to the LORD, <sup>16</sup> “May the LORD, the God who gives breath to all living things, appoint someone over this community <sup>17</sup> to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD’s people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.” <sup>18</sup> So the LORD said to Moses, “Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit of leadership,<sup>[a]</sup> and lay your hand on him. <sup>19</sup> Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire

assembly and commission him in their presence. <sup>20</sup> Give him some of your authority so the whole Israelite community will obey him. <sup>21</sup> He is to stand before Eleazar the priest, who will obtain decisions for him by inquiring of the Urim before the LORD. At his command he and the entire community of the Israelites will go out, and at his command they will come in.” <sup>22</sup> Moses did as the LORD commanded him. He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole assembly. <sup>23</sup> Then he laid his hands on him and commissioned him, as the LORD instructed through Moses

One of the most outstanding leaders in the Old Testament is Moses. He liberated the Hebrew slaves, delivered them from Egyptian armies, gave the Law to the people, spoke and saw God. Moses is an example of a pastor who has served a congregation faithfully for many years, leading the church to unprecedented growth and fruitfulness that is loved by all in the congregation. This pastor is the one other pastors may be reluctant to follow because of the fruitfulness in leading the congregation. Despite the success of a pastor or organizational leader, a good transition can help an incoming pastor navigate through the transition and lead a congregation to fruitfulness. Through God’s wisdom, Moses brought Joshua before the leaders and all the people to see and put his hands on him, and anointed him as the new leader. Moses gave his blessing and empowered Joshua to lead and encouraged all the assembly to accept Joshua as their new leader. What Moses did for Joshua is what the outgoing pastor did for me in my first full-time appointment

The hope for every incoming pastor and judicatory representative is that every pastoral transition will be like Moses to Joshua, smooth and accepted by the people; however, not all transitions will go smoothly. Sometimes churches and pastors look to their own wants and needs instead of following the Spirit of God. Pastors and lay people, at times, cannot let go of what has been and fear what may be. Occasionally, there are churches that only know how to complain and make things difficult for the incoming pastors. At times, pastors come with their own agenda and do not care what the laity thinks or wants and will do what they want.

This work is for all those pastors and church leaders who are now experiencing or have experienced a difficult pastoral transition and want to do better. What will be presented are a few tools to add to your toolbox that may help with some of those difficult moments. No pastor or church is perfect, so conflict is always a possibility. With clergy and laity working together, it is possible to make any pastoral transition fruitful.

### **The importance of a Good Transition**

The transition phase of a congregation can be an exciting and scary time for the pastor and congregation. If done well, long-time fruitfulness and vitality will follow; if not, the cycle of pastoral transition and grief will continue. William Bridges has written one of the most influential works on transitions, *Transitions*. Bridges' work is often cited in churches and businesses as a tool to help an organization through a transition. Bridges' basis for transition he sums up with words from T.S. Eliot, "What we call the beginning is often the end and to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from."<sup>3</sup>

With those words in mind, Bridges describes transition into three stages. The first stage is called "Endings."<sup>4</sup> This is the point at which the congregation is made aware of the pastoral change. This stage varies in length because people receive the information at different times. Those active in church ministry, leaders, and staff will likely be the first to know of a change, while those who are less active may not know until the day of or after departure. "Whether [of] long or short duration, this stage of endings is filled with many conflicting emotions and behaviors, including disorganization, disengagement, letting go and withdrawal."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Bridges.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Sweester, *Changing Pastors: A Resource for Pastoral Transitions* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1998), 8.

The second stage Bridges describes is called the “Neutral Zone or the in-between time.”<sup>6</sup> This is the period that most churches do not grasp. Feelings are ignored or suppressed, so the pastor, family, and church do not feel pain. United Methodists and many other churches and denominations rush through this stage to call or appoint the next pastor so the church can just move on. The problem with ignoring this stage is that this tends to be where the hurt, pain, and grief grow. According to Sweester, “This period overlaps with the first because both pastor and people, in preparing for transition, feel as if they are in limbo. They are uncertain, anxious, confused, unbelieving, at a loss. As the termination rituals for the departing pastor take place, the staff, leaders and people are left wondering ‘what’s next?’”<sup>7</sup> The good news about this stage is that if a church, pastor, or denomination takes their time in this stage and reflects upon who the church and pastor are, they may discern God’s next steps. In this moment, a church and pastor can vision or re-vision its purpose, ministry, and calling.

The third and final stage is called “New Beginnings”<sup>8</sup> In this stage, the church and pastor have taken the time to understand who they are together in ministry. They have visioned their future ministry together, and fruit is beginning to be seen. One of the purposes of this work and the tools to be shared is so that a church and pastor can transition from the second to the third and final stage and experience the fruitfulness God intends.

For comparison, a second theory of transition introduced by Sabrina Spencer and John Adams describes transition in seven stages, “Losing Focus, Minimizing the Impact, The Pit, Letting Go of The Past, Testing the Limits, Searching for Meaning, and Integrating.”<sup>9</sup> Even though they use different terminology and identify more stages, the transition process is similar.

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<sup>6</sup> Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes*.

<sup>7</sup> Sweester, *Changing Pastors: A Resource for Pastoral Transitions*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Adams Spencer, Sabrina John, *Life Changes* (Virginia: Impact, 1990), 10.

There is a time of grief, uncertainty, followed by a healthy church transition. Because most books about transition use William Bridges as a primary source, I will use his material as the foundation for talking about pastoral transition.

One such author who relies heavily on William Bridges is Rosalind Cardinal who applies practical examples of how a person can navigate through transition. Helpful tools for a church experiencing transition, or as Cardinal identifies it, the “in-between stage,” are to:

1. Do something that makes you feel in control—Don’t make excuses, but do something productive in your control.
2. Take stock of your life and choose an area to focus—learn, grow, do something new or fun.
3. Think bigger and bolder—Dream about your future, imagine your success, let it give you hope.
4. Do not confuse the present with the past—What happened in the past, if it was bad, does not have to repeat itself.
5. Accept that this is an awkward stage—Everyone goes through change, and few enjoy it. Know this is the season of life you are in.<sup>10</sup>

Cardinal also describes why transition takes longer than change because the average person has to go through a specific process, which he describes as follows:

Assess: When a change is announced we assess the change, what’s in it for me?

Classify: We classify the change, is it good for me or bad for me? Or is there not enough information to determine that? Typically change is bad.

React: We experience an emotional reaction to our classification, we can be in denial, get angry or sad, or experience any number of other emotions.

Resist: We push back against the change. This takes many different forms.

Seek: We spend our time trying to make sense of the change. We may ask questions, talk to lots of people, try to figure out what is happening, and try to understand why.

Accept or reject: When we are finished gathering information, we will make a decision about the change and its impact. We accept that it is for real, or choose to leave, or stay and reject the change until something gives. (Many churches live in this place for multiple pastors)

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<sup>10</sup> Rosalind Cardinal, *The Resilient Employee* (Australia: Rosalind Cardinal & Associates Pty Ltd, 2016), 43.

Early engagement: We start to tentatively explore the change and consider how it might be worth thinking about.

Buy in: We get it, the changes make sense, and we start to see how we play a part in it.

Action: We are on board, and we implement the change.<sup>11</sup>

An argument can be made whether a pastor is appointed or called; God is at the center of this change. The idea is if the church is receiving a new pastor, it is because God is sending a pastor to a congregation or sending them away. This may be the case in a perfect world, but we do not live in this perfect world. We live in a world where pastors can have selfish desires and want to get to the next bigger church. We live in a world where congregations are never satisfied with their pastor and always think someone will be better. We also live in a world where clergy gets sick or burnout and needs a change. Sometimes after years of fruitfulness, a congregation may get stuck and need to say goodbye to a beloved pastor to ignite new ministry and ideas. Regardless of why, churches will experience pastoral change, and pastors will have to lead a congregation through this process. God is in these moments, but God also gives clergy and laity tools to help transitioning pastors and churches.

### **Understanding grief in pastoral transition**

One of the primary challenges in clergy transition and the root cause for many difficult transitions is grief. When a church or anyone loses something, such as a pastor leaving or arriving, they experience grief. According to Merriam-Webster, “grief is deep and poignant distress, suffering, trouble, annoyance.”<sup>12</sup> Typically, we speak of grief in relation to the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job or health, or some other life-changing event. Though much of my research on grief relates to people, I will demonstrate that all theories of grief in relation to an

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<sup>11</sup> Cardinal, 56.

<sup>12</sup> “Grief,” in *Merriam-Webster*, accessed August 16, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/grief>.



individual or small group also apply to systems such as churches or denominations. J. Shep Jeffreys's book *Coping with Workplace Grief* enumerates the "Seven Basic Principles of Grief"<sup>13</sup> that individuals and organizations experience.

1. You cannot fix or cure grief
2. Everyone grieves differently
3. There is no set timetable for grief
4. Every loss is a multiple loss
5. Grief comes as a result of loss due to change: Change=Loss=Grief
6. Grieving the loss of what was and reinvesting in what will be can eventually bring about growth and renewal
7. We grieve our old losses whenever we experience a new loss

The last two principles, six and seven, are most relevant for a new pastor arriving at a church experiencing grief. Whenever there is a pastoral change, the congregation may be experiencing grief, not just from the previous pastor leaving, but from their history of pastors. The thought of having to go through another pastoral change can surface memories of beloved pastors and memories if the shift to a new pastor did not go well. An incoming pastor cannot stop this grief because it is natural, but awareness of suffering will help the pastor lead and care for the congregation. The wise pastor can take the information of grief and move the congregation in a positive direction, as Jeffreys states, by "reinvesting"<sup>14</sup> to eventually experience growth, renewal, and fruitfulness.

Two works are beneficial for understanding grief, one by John Bowlby and the other by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Even though Kübler-Ross' work on grief has been the standard for much research, Bowlby was the one who initially developed the Four Stages of Grief that Ross based her work. Bowlby's theory on grief came out of working on attachment theory and children with difficult backgrounds. The theory of grief and loss came out of the experiences of children's

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<sup>13</sup> J. Shep Jeffreys, *Coping with Workplace Grief* (New York: Axzo Press, 2005), V.

<sup>14</sup> Jeffreys, V.

grief reactions and working with survivors of loss. Ross's theories are related to Bowlby, but her research was with dying patients. The wording Bowlby and Ross use are different, but they are similar in meaning.

<u>Bowlby</u>		<u>Ross</u>
Phase I:	Numbness and Shutdown	Denial
Phase II:	Protest	Anger
Phase III:	Disorganization/Despair	Bargaining and Depression
Phase IV:	Detachment/Reorganization <sup>15</sup>	Acceptance

For the purpose of this work, I will be using Ross's work in grief theory. There are two reasons for using her work. First, her work is generally cited as the most authoritative in grief theory. Second, because her approach was based upon dying patients instead of grieving children, I believe there is a closer connection to the grief church's experience. The church is not a building but a people, and because it is people, it has a life cycle. Churches that experience continued pastoral transition and conflict tend to be dying churches. Therefore, I think it is most appropriate to use grief theory on dying patients as the conflicted church most resembles a dying person.

The five stages of grief outlined by Kübler-Ross are Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. Denial is the first stage of grief she describes, noting that, "Denial functions as a buffer after unexpected, shocking news, allows the patient to collect himself, and within time, mobilize other, less radical defenses."<sup>16</sup> Ross' understanding of denial relates to not accepting a terminal illness or impending death. When the announcement of pastoral change occurs often, it comes with shock, especially when it is not because of a planned separation such as retirement. The congregation initially denies the news but also knows this is a reality in parish ministry.

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<sup>15</sup> John Bowlby, *Loss: Sadness and Depression* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 35.

<sup>16</sup> Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth, *On Death and Dying* (London: Routledge, 1973), 38.

After the denial stage, a person enters into the Anger stage. Kübler-Ross describes this stage of grief as coming in many different ways and as being expressed towards other people, such as through “Anger at your loved one that he didn’t take better care of himself or anger that you didn’t take better care of him. Anger does not have to be logical or valid... You may be angry with the doctors for not being able to save someone so dear to you.”<sup>17</sup> After a congregation works through their denial of a pastoral change, the possibility of entering into a prolonged stage of anger is high. If the news of change is unwelcomed or unplanned, the shock may lead to anger. The level of anger varies according to the circumstance, for example, according to whether the pastor was fired or deliberately removed, whether the denomination stepped in and forced the pastor to move to another church, or whether it was an anticipated move that had been discussed, perhaps by the superintendent and pastor with the parish at a church meeting. Based upon the circumstances, the degree and period of anger varies considerably. Based upon comments from my peers and denominational leaders in The United Methodist Church, it seems that some churches have been angry for decades. Writes Kübler-Ross, “Maybe we too would be angry if all our life activities were interrupted so prematurely; if all the buildings we started were to go unfinished, to be completed by someone else; if we had put some hard-earned money aside to enjoy a few years of rest and enjoyment, for travel and pursuing hobbies, only to be confronted with the fact that ‘this is not for me.’ What else would we do with our anger, but let it out on people who are most likely to enjoy all these things?”<sup>18</sup> There is the potential for anger when unfinished ministry plans are not fulfilled, when the vision of a pastor is cut short, or when the investment from laity in a ministry project they are passionate about ends because there will

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<sup>17</sup> Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth; Kessler, David, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 11.

<sup>18</sup> Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, *On Death and Dying*, 50.

be a pastoral change. The incoming pastor may be completely unaware of this anger and may walk into a minefield of grief.

The third stage of grief Kübler-Ross identifies is called bargaining. In this stage, one begins to reflect on the loss and bargains with God or another higher power. The grieved person starts asking “if only” and “what if” questions such as, “Please God, I will never be angry at my wife again if you’ll let her live,” or “What if I devote the rest of my life to helping others?” At this point it is easy to become lost in a maze of “If only...” or “What if...” statements and questions. We want life to return to what it was; we want our loved ones restored. We want to go back in time: Find the tumor sooner, recognize the illness more quickly, stop the accident from...if only, if only, if only.”<sup>19</sup> For a congregation experiencing pastoral change, the bargaining stage questions may be framed by questions like, “What if we grew more, or had more money, or more ministry...?” Their “what if” or “if only” questions may relate to the church’s current fruitfulness, or the congregation may ignore this stage and stay angry at the pastor, congregational leaders, or denomination.

The fourth stage of grief is depression. Says Kübler-Ross,

After bargaining, our attention moves squarely into the present. Empty feelings present themselves, and grief enters our lives on a deeper level, deeper than we ever imagined. This depressive stage feels as though it will last forever. It’s important to understand that this depression is not a sign of mental illness. It is the appropriate response to great loss. We withdraw from life, left in a fog of intense sadness, perhaps, if there is any point in going on alone. Why go on at all?<sup>20</sup>

A church often manifests the depressive stage of grief by experiencing membership and attendance loss. The church may also experience a loss in the number or the strength of its ministries, as some in the congregation may decide it is too painful to stay and move on to

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<sup>19</sup> Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth; Kessler, David, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth; Kessler, David, 20.

another church or to no church at all. With the loss of lay leadership comes the loss of ministry programming.

According to Kübler-Ross, the final stage of grief is acceptance: “Acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage. It is almost void of feelings. It is as if the pain had gone, the struggle is over, and there comes a time for ‘the final rest before the long journey, as one patient phrased it.’”<sup>21</sup> If a church accepts that the pastoral change is inevitable, they will come to some acceptance, even if they do not like the situation. The reality is that many churches, especially smaller congregations, feel powerless to do anything about pastoral changes. They accept multiple pastors because the church’s experience is that pastors come and go. Acceptance for these churches looks more like ignoring grief because they simply push through any emotional pain or attachment with a current or previous pastor.

The Five Stages of Grief are not a linear approach to grief, one through which one progresses and from which one graduates. People and organizations often bounce between stages or get stuck in one stage. One does not go from stage to stage, and then stops grieving. So unless a pastor or denominational leader helps a congregation through their grief, it is likely that they will continue to grieve, unaware of their own pain.

Kübler-Ross’ book is specifically related to physical death and grief caused by losing a loved one. As I have demonstrated, The Five Stages of Grief that she describes can also be related to an organization, such as a church experiencing pastoral transition. The loss the church experiences when a pastor leaves is primarily a loss of a relationship. But it can also mean that ministries end, staff move, finances are harmed, and the church's future will look uncertain.

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<sup>21</sup> Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth, *On Death and Dying*, 110.

These are significant losses, yet pastors and denominational leaders often fail to realize that the church will be hurting when there is pastoral change, and that this hurt may extend for decades.

Although Ross's work is primarily related to the dying person, I have tried to make a connection between the dying person and the experiences a church has when in pastoral transition. A work specifically dealing with organizational grief was written by J. Shep Jeffrey titled, *Coping with Workplace Grief*. In this work, Jeffreys identifies issues when an organization or, in this case, a church suffers from unresolved grief. He identifies three areas of concern:

The first concern is "Developmental Loss, each time there is a change or transition that is a normal part of life, we lose what was before. If we are never given the opportunity to express any feelings about these changes, we store the feeling."<sup>22</sup> It is no wonder that so many churches remember a pastor they loved when they perceived themselves in the glory days of ministry. Because they have not adequately expressed their feelings in a healthy way, the church continues to go through pastor after pastor because none measures up to a pastor from long ago.

The second concern is "Breaking of Actual Bond, we store up loss material when bonds we have made are broken, such as when a loved one moves away, a pet dies, a beloved toy is lost... whenever an attachment bond is broken, there is grief, and grief wants to cry and rage. If we have been denied the right to externalize or get these feelings out, we store them away."<sup>23</sup> Every denomination has what they call difficult churches. Are these churches difficult because they lack the love of Jesus, or are they difficult because they have been denied the right to externalize their feelings of grief, loss, and pain?

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<sup>22</sup> Jeffreys, *Coping with Workplace Grief*, 57.

<sup>23</sup> Jeffreys, 57.

The third concern is, “Threat of Loss because this threat of loss of someone or something is ongoing, it creates a highly destructive and painful collection of unfinished business that gets stored up if it is not managed well.”<sup>24</sup> Smaller churches have a higher chance of experiencing multiple pastoral transitions because of their limited financial resources. Because of this trend, especially in The United Methodist Church, these churches tend to believe the larger denomination wants to shut them down or merge them with larger churches. The thought of being shut down is not reality but perception, and because of unresolved grief, it can make these churches distrustful of denominational authority.

Grief is real in pastoral transition and can be a problem for an incoming pastor, existing laity, and denominational leaders. How we proceed from here can be summed up in Kübler-Ross’ final work, *On Grief and Grieving*. “Your task in your own mourning and grieving is to fully recognize your own loss, to see it as only you can. In paying the respect and taking the time it deserves, you bring integrity to the deep loss that is yours.”<sup>25</sup> When there is pastoral change, everyone experiences some loss. To some, it is insignificant; to others, it is deep and hurtful. Hope, renewal, and fruitfulness are possible if the pastor and church find meaning in loss. Finding meaning in change will not be easy and, depending on the length and level of grief, could take a long time. However, if the foundational work is done to help the grieving church understand the bigger picture and how God is working in their lives, they will be able to experience healing; according to David Kessler, “meaning doesn’t require understanding. It’s not necessary to understand why... loss is simply what happens to you in life... only you can find your own meaning.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey, 57.

<sup>25</sup> Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth; Kessler, David, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*, 31.

<sup>26</sup> Kessler, David, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*. (New York: Scribner, 2019), 7.

Much has been written to understand the grieving process for individuals, yet business organizations and churches experience grief too. Because little thought is given to the grieving congregation, many churches experience unresolved grief and do not always function healthily. How does an incoming pastor lead a grieving congregation to healing and fruitfulness? Unfortunately, there are not many resources that deal with organizational grief in the church; however, there is a large body of work dealing with corporate grief in business. One such work comes from the work of Rosalind Cardinal who relies on Kübler--Ross' *Five Stages of Grief* and William Bridges *Transitions*, grief occurs in organizational transitions because employees and the organization have to let go of something (what she describes as the "letting go stage.")<sup>27</sup> "This could be the end of a relationship, the end of a job, the end of security, or the end of unfulfilled dreams."<sup>28</sup> What Cardinal describes is much like what a congregation goes through when there is a pastoral change. The church will need to let go of the pastor and family and perhaps some goals and ministry plans. Because churches have not adequately dealt with the grief of a moving pastor, at times they still believe a pastor that served their church decades earlier is the only good pastor they ever had and will ever have. The church has not let go of the past and moved on to its future. Whether it is large business cooperation, a large or small church, the organization can get stuck in the past because it does not acknowledge that it has experienced pain and grief in its history. A work was written by Dan Moseley, *When Congregations Grieve*, reinforces Rosalind Cardinal's thought of congregations getting stuck in the past. Moseley writes, "Congregations who grow old gracefully and welcome new persons and ideas into their life are the one who know how to grieve their losses. The ones who become rigid and bitter are

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<sup>27</sup> Cardinal, *The Resilient Employee*, 40.

<sup>28</sup> Cardinal, 40.



the ones who never accept the truth that the only constant in life is change.”<sup>29</sup> Because these congregations resist change and do not adequately grieve the loss of a pastor, they get stuck.

Before moving away from the subject of congregational grief in pastoral transition, a question may have arisen as to why this can be so painful for a congregation? All people will experience grief in their lives, but why does a pastoral transition have the potential to cause much grief and conflict? Moseley’s work as an interim pastor and writing on congregational grief provide insight into why congregations grieve when their pastor moves. He argues that the role of the pastor has much to do with the level of grief a congregation may experience. “The role of pastor is central to their self-image and their self-understanding. When the pastor leaves, there is confusion. They have to learn to relate to each other differently.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, the pastor represents the “true north”<sup>31</sup> of a congregation. When the personality of the pastor and the identity of the congregation are suddenly changed, the congregation will grieve, and depending on the level of investment in the relationship between pastor and church will determine the level of grief the congregation will experience.

***Tools to help a pastor lead a conflicted church through grief and transition***

As I shared in my story, I experienced a difficult church transition. One of the most significant issues for the church was that they never fully dealt with their grief in pastoral change. Because they never dealt with or acknowledged grief, they developed a pattern of short pastoral tenure of three years or less for multiple pastors. Occasionally, they would have a pastor stay for seven to ten years, but then it would go back to three or fewer years. This pattern went

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<sup>29</sup> Dan Moseley, “When Congregations Grieve,” *Review & Expositor*, 2003, 221.

<sup>30</sup> Moseley, 223.

<sup>31</sup> Moseley, 222.

on for generations because their grief led the church to constant conflict with one another and with incoming pastors.

Because of this experience, I began developing and applying tools that I had learned in a pastoral care training program on using Transactional Analysis in counseling and pastoral care. United Methodist Pastor, Rev. Dr. P.T. Wilson had trained several other pastors and me in a pilot program developed by the American Association of Pastoral Counselors to teach basic skills to clergy in rural and underrepresented areas that lacked counselors. Applying the knowledge and tools I learned from this program; I was better prepared to deal with the grieving church in conflict because of pastoral change. I have successfully used these tools in two consecutive congregations. Both congregations were small, rural, and predominately white. One congregation was rural in a small town, while the other was rural outside a large city, and both congregations were older and had their pastor removed by denominational authorities, and both removals were because of ineffectiveness as pastors. The tools I used in these settings can be effective in all sizes and types of congregations because these tools will be used primarily with individuals in conflict. I hope that other pastors may find these tools valuable in church transition when a church's grief has turned to conflict.

Two tools I have found valuable in helping me understand and then care for the conflicted, grieving church are Games and Scripts, both of which come from the discipline of Transactional Analysis (TA). I have found these tools helpful because Games deal with patterns of behavior dealing with feelings and emotions. Understanding these patterns will help the incoming pastor better care for a conflicted, grieving congregation's emotions. Scripts are also helpful in understanding the decision-making patterns of the church or individuals in the church.

Both of these theories will be expanded upon in more detail to fully understand the purpose and use of these tools in helping a grieving congregation.

Before I explain these tools, it would be helpful to understand their origins, namely in the discipline of Transactional Analysis. The creator of this psychoanalytic theory and method of therapy was Canadian psychiatrist Eric Berne (1910–1970). In this mode of therapy, the unit of social intercourse is called a transaction.

If two or more people encounter each other in a social aggregation, sooner or later, one of them will speak, or give some other indication of acknowledging the presence of others. This is called the transactional stimulus. Another person will then say or do something which is in some way related to this stimulus, and that is called the transactional response. Simple transactional analysis is concerned with diagnosing which ego state implemented the transactional stimulus, and which one executed the transactional response.<sup>32</sup>

Whereas Freud talked of the ego states as, “Superego-restrictive controlling force, Id-instinctual drives, and Ego-enlightened self-interest,”<sup>33</sup> Berne identified the ego states or state of Being as “Parent-rules order, Child-feelings, Adult-decision making and objectivity.”<sup>34</sup> Though TA may not be familiar to many, most people will likely have heard of one of its foundational aspects, the three states of being, or ego state, Parent, Adult, Child. The Parent “is a huge collection of recordings in the brain of unquestioned or imposed external events perceived by a person in his early years, a period which we have designated roughly at the first five years of life.”<sup>35</sup> The recordings are often referred to as “tapes,”<sup>36</sup> which record every conversation and interaction with one’s parents. At this state of being we learn rules from our parents and later instill them in our lives or those of others. The “tapes” the Parent state of being records will be with us for our

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<sup>32</sup> Eric Berne, *Games People Play: The Basic Handbook of Transactional Analysis* (New York: Random House, 1964), 29.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Harris, *I’m Ok-You’re Ok* (New York: HarperCollins, 1967), 2.

<sup>34</sup> Berne, *Games People Play: The Basic Handbook of Transactional Analysis*, VII.

<sup>35</sup> Harris, *I’m Ok-You’re Ok*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Harris, 20.

lifetime. The theory is that if we experience love and acceptance, we will likely grow to be loving and accepting people. If we experience violence, we will likely exert violence or live in fear, all because we play the “tapes”<sup>37</sup> repeatedly.

The second state of being is called the Child: “This is the recording of internal events, the responses of the little person to what he sees and hears...thus, evoked recollection is not the exact photographic or phonographic reproduction of past scenes or events. It is a reproduction of what the patient saw and heard and felt and understood”.<sup>38</sup> While the Adult state of being is more about being taught rules and using these rules later in life, the Child’s experience is more about feeling.

The third state of being is called the Adult. Says Berne, “the Adult is principally concerned with transforming stimuli into pieces of information and processing and filing that information based on previous experience. It is different from the Parent, which is judgmental in an imitative way and seeks to enforce sets of borrowed standards, and from the Child, which tends to react more abruptly based on prelogical thinking and poorly differentiated or distorted perceptions.”<sup>39</sup> The adult state of being is one in which one can make informed decisions.

For the clergy person coming to a church that is grieving the loss of its pastor, the knowledge of a person’s state of being can be helpful. As the new pastor sits around the table with the church leaders, healing, fruitfulness, and growth can happen with adults who are making decisions and processing their grief. If a pastor is dealing with parents, the emphasis will be on rules, and the church has a particular way of doing things, which will not change. If the new pastor deals with children, the feelings will be most notable. How does the person feel? How

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<sup>37</sup> Harris, 20.

<sup>38</sup> Harris, 27.

<sup>39</sup> Harris, 32.

does the church feel? The Parent may not express feelings, while the Child may not get past their feelings. The Adult can process all of these and make decisions to heal and help the church.

To understand Bernes' work, one must understand common terms in Transactional Analysis. These include stroking and game analysis.: Stroking is "the recognition one person gives another, [and is] essential for physical and psychological health".<sup>40</sup> Stroking can be physical or words. Strokes can be negative or positive, and are required for people, especially children, to develop. *Game Analysis*, "a game is a patterned and predictable series of transactions which are superficially plausible but conceal motivations and lead to a well-defined predictable outcome. They are habitual, dysfunctional Methods of obtaining strokes, and the people involved are not fully aware of the two levels of transactions in which they are engaged."<sup>41</sup>

Building on Berne's initial definition of games, in the late 1970s Bob and Mary Goulding found that games operate in certain orders:

1. Person A gives an ostensible message while at the same time giving a hidden message.
2. Person B responds to the hidden message.
3. Person A then switches ego states and has a surprise bad feeling.<sup>42</sup>

Steve Karpman likewise built on Bernes' work, for example by stating that in drama as in games, there needs to be a victim. Hence what he calls the Drama Triangle:

[I]n order to be a victim, a person needs either a rescuer or a persecutor. To keep the drama going, people switch roles in regard to each other, or even bring in third parties, forming a drama triangle of interaction. In games, these roles are interchangeably played by all the participants. When people play one of the roles, they may suddenly be surprised to find themselves playing another one.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Berne, *Games People Play: The Basic Handbook of Transactional Analysis*, VII.

<sup>41</sup> Berne, IX.

<sup>42</sup> Berne, X.

<sup>43</sup> Berne, XIII.

Karpman also stated that the person who starts a game does so with what he calls a discount, explaining: “These come in one of four varieties: 1. A discount that there is a problem. 2. A discount of the significance of the problem. 3. A discount that the problem is solvable by the person. 4. A discount that the problem is solvable by anyone.”<sup>44</sup>

Triangles are used in two different systems: in Eric Berne’s Transactional Analysis and in Murray Bowen’s Systems Theory. Murray Bowen sought to ground his family systems theory in natural systems thinking, and to create a theory of human functioning that was consonant with the facts of evolutionary biology.<sup>45</sup> Bowen adopted the term “triangle,” taken from mathematics, to describe a family systems theory congruent with emotional-instinctual processes present in the life sciences, specifically evolutionary biological theory.<sup>46</sup> What did he mean by a triangle in such a system? In Bowen's theory, triangles are the smallest stable building block of any emotional system. According to Bowen, a two-person system is stable as long as anxiety remains low. But when anxiety increases, “it automatically draws in the most vulnerable third person and becomes a triangle”.<sup>47</sup> Predictably, triangles have two close individuals in the inside positions and one that is in the outside position. In an anxious system the preferred position is on the outside.<sup>48</sup>

The triangle is an automatic instinctive process based on coercion, deception, and exploitation.<sup>49</sup> Based on his observations, Bowen often spoke about individuals in a triangular relationship, which they used to shift anxiety in the system. When two people have tension in

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<sup>44</sup> Berne, XIII.

<sup>45</sup> Titelman, Peter, *Triangles: Bowen Family Systems Theory Perspectives* (New York: Haworth Press, 2008), 18.

<sup>46</sup> Titelman, Peter, 19.

<sup>47</sup> Titelman, Peter, 19.

<sup>48</sup> Titelman, Peter, 20.

<sup>49</sup> Titelman, Peter, 65.

their relationship, they tend to involve a third person in order to shift the anxiety to that third person.<sup>50</sup>

The concept of the triangle was one of the first concepts added to Bowen's Family Systems Theory in 1955. Bowen wrote that the triangle, "a three-person emotional configuration, is the molecule or the basic building block of any emotional system, whether it is in the family or any other group."<sup>51</sup> Bell offered some examples of triangles:<sup>52</sup>

Let's say you are the chair of the trustees for your congregation. You're about to walk into a worship service and the chair of finance corners you. They start to tell you how upset they are with the chair of the personnel team. A triangle has been activated.

You are upset about something the pastor said last week in a meeting. You get together with the personnel committee chair to tell them how much you dislike the pastor and how you wish the pastor were removed. A triangle has been activated.

If you have ever been in a meeting where a few vocal members are complaining about someone else in the church and you remain silent, even though you disagree with their views, a triangle has been activated.

Triangles are unhealthy relationships and usually occur without your knowledge. Understanding how a triangle works will help a person (in our case, a clergyperson) understand when they get in a triangle with other people. In Bowen's understanding of the triangle, there are two comfortable people and one outsider. Because the one person is an outsider, it looks like rejection, and the outsider may feel there is something wrong with them or they are being ganged up on by the other two. In Bowen's theory, a shift will occur in this triangle relationship. One of the comfortable people will pair with the uncomfortable one, and the one who is left by themselves will now feel like the rejected one. Tensions will rise in this situation because the new outsider will do everything in her power to shift the relationship back to the way it was.

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<sup>50</sup> Titelman, Peter, 74.

<sup>51</sup> John Bell, "Triangles," n.d., <https://thecenterforfamilyconsultation.com/understanding-triangles-is-key-to-conflict-resolution/>.

<sup>52</sup> Bell.

Bell states the complexity of this relationship as follows:

With high levels of tension, the desired position is the outside. An insider makes the move to be the new outsider by attempting to create a conflict between the other two. As the other two fight it out, the outside position becomes the comfortable position. At some point, the outsider will make a move to be back in the insider position. In congregations, triangles are the mechanism for conflict. When two people are in conflict, it is more than likely [that] a third person is involved. So, an understanding of triangles is the first step in conflict mediation for congregational leaders. The key to Bowen's concept of the triangle is remembering that triangles are not created in moments of tension. Triangles exist due to the emotional connections made when we enter a relationship system. As anxiety rises, it activates reactivity in the triangle. When one finds oneself in a triangle, it's important to think about one's own need for emotional attachment. When one is drawn into other people's problems, think back on the family. How is this similar to the way people live out triangles in one's family of origin? Interlocking triangles occur when the original triangle can no longer contain the level of anxiety and reactivity—a reality for people in any relationship system.

The Bowen Triangle and the drama triangle use similar language and concepts.

Charlotte Sills uses the work of Berne and Karpman to apply games and the drama triangle to larger groups or organizations. She notes that “when people repeatedly play the same game in a group, they may be expressing a basic human dilemma which the group has not been addressing. That is, quite apart from personal issues, a person who plays NIGYSOB (Now I've Got You, You Son of a Bitch) or Blemish may be expressing the group's unacknowledged avoidance of dealing with the general human issue of trust”.<sup>53</sup> Berne's work is based on working with many patients. In his research developing Transactional Analysis and games, he uses colloquialisms to identify types of games through countless interviews and research, “Now I've Got You, You Son of a Bitch”<sup>54</sup> is one of those colloquialisms. In Berne's book, he details numerous games and how they can be played out. Because of Sills' work identifying NIGYSOB as a particular game related to larger groups, let's take a look at how this might look in a church setting, specifically a small, rural United Methodist congregation receiving a new pastor by

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<sup>53</sup> Berne, *Games People Play: The Basic Handbook of Transactional Analysis*, XIV.

<sup>54</sup> Berne, 85.



appointment after their third pastor in less than ten years, each pastor averaging around three years before being moved to a new church. The Staff Pastor Parish Relationship Committee, which operates like a human resources department or a search committee, receives the news that a new appointment will be made. They and the Conference superintendent go through the normal process of discernment of what the church is looking for in a new pastor. The superintendent, who is the representative of the bishop, takes this to the bishop and cabinet, and this team works on discerning the next pastor. The appointment is made based upon the input of the church and the superintendent. The church welcomes the new pastor, though the church may or may not be excited about this new change. Regardless, there is usually positive energy around the new appointment in the beginning. What happens many times in these situations of conflicted churches is that the new pastor says or does something, and then the conflict begins. The SPRC calls the superintendent and can fall into the game of NIGYSOB. The church now begins the mantra of “the Conference wants to shut us down,” and “the denomination does not like small churches; they never send us ‘good’ pastors,” etc. The negative commentary continues until the next appointment, when the cycle begins again. Churches that have experienced multiple pastoral transitions, one every three to four years, typically have not adequately dealt with their grief and have come not to trust the search committee or denominational authorities who place new pastors. Because they lack trust, the relationship with a new pastor is already damaged from the outset. A key to building trust in a congregation is to listen. What is their pain? Why do they feel this way? Why does the church continue to end up in the same situation? The Drama Triangle is always something to avoid because everyone who plays this game will get hurt.

How does one get out of this type of game? Once you recognize you are in a game, you choose not to play the game; if you realize you are in a game and continue to play, you are manipulative.

A second tool a pastor can use from Transactional Analysis is script theory. One of the Indiana Conference's great resources is a link to every church in the Conference. You can look up all the church data for decades, such as attendance, membership, financial information, and pastor history. I find pastoral history fascinating in part because of the patterns one finds in individual churches. Let's say that for three pastors in a row they stay at this church for three years, then the fourth stays for ten. The pattern repeats itself every four pastors: three, three, three, ten years. Are these random patterns? Or do they demonstrate a "script"? Early in Berne's career as a psychoanalyst, he developed script analysis theory, noting that,

Games appear to be segments of larger, more complex sets of transactions called scripts...A script is a complex set of transactions, by nature recurrent, but not necessarily recurring since a complex performance may require a whole lifetime...The object of script analysis is to close the show and put a better one on the road.<sup>55</sup>

Claude Steiner, who's contributed extensively to script theory in his book, *Scripts People Live*, postulates that:

Script analysis can be called a decision theory rather than a disease theory of emotional disturbance. Script theory is based on the belief that people make conscious life plans in childhood or early adolescence which influence and make predictable the rest of their lives. Person whose lives are based on such decisions are said to have scripts. Like diseases, scripts have an onset, a course, and an outcome. Because of this similarity, life scripts are easily mistaken for diseases. However, because scripts are based on consciously willed decisions rather than morbid tissue changes, they can be revoked or undecided by similarly willed decisions. Tragic life scripts such as suicide, drug addiction, or incurable mental illnesses such as schizophrenia or manic-depressive psychosis are the result of scripting rather than disease.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Eric Berne, *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy: A Systematic Individual and Social Psychiatry* (New York: Grove Press, 1961).

<sup>56</sup> Claude Steiner, *Scripts People Live* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 23.

For example, if one looks at a family history, one might find that for three generations every male that turns fifty experiences heart disease. Another script could be that every female in multiple generations has a pregnancy at fifteen. At one of my churches, a family had three daughters who, in their first marriage, all married men in their second. Are these just random, or are they scripts that people develop in early childhood? I would argue that these are scripts, but Berne and others believe a script can be broken or changed, sometimes by a conscious decision or by a change in circumstance. I have personally worked through two script issues that are no longer scripts in my life. My father died at age forty-five when I was ten. After getting married and having three children, I always thought I would die young, especially when I turned forty-five, and one of my children was ten. I struggled with this for many years, but because I was aware this was a script, I made a conscious effort to say this would not happen to me because I am not my father. My second script in my life relates to my work as a pastor. I received my first appointment at a church in 1997. From 1997 to 2012, I never stayed in a church for more than three years. This script led me to struggle with whether I was called to be a pastor and my effectiveness as one. Many people encouraged me and affirmed my call and ministry, but I always seem to “have” to move for various reasons after three years. By 2016, I had served my current church for four years—and would go on to serve three more. I had broken that script. At forty-five, it was the first time that I had lived anyplace longer than three years since I was seventeen. After graduating high school, I entered the military and spent the next fourteen years in active and reserve status in various service branches. Early in my ministry, I scripted my work as a pastor to be similar to that in the military, where a service member moves to a new duty station every three years. Scripts are compelling, and sometimes people are completely unaware

of them. Until I wrote this section about scripts, I had never realized that the year I broke the script about moving was the same year I thought I would die in the earlier script.

Script theory applies to people and organizations. Understanding one's script takes reflection and analysis. For an organization, it will take historical research and asking questions of the congregation. The good news is that once a person identifies a script, one can easily see it in different situations and respond appropriately with grace and love recognizing that scripts are usually beyond a person's or organization's awareness.

The tools outlined so far can help deal with a congregation in grief and conflict; however, one situation will require extra sensitivity of a new pastor: following a pastor who is being removed because of sexual misconduct .

A book called *Restoring the Soul of the Church: Healing Congregations Wounded by Clergy Sexual Misconduct* is an essential source for dealing with clergy sexual misconduct. Several contributing authors offer background, resources, and tools for clergy who are following a pastor being removed because of sexual misconduct. Contributor Darlene K. Haskin describes a project that began in Minnesota with a group of pastors who “gathered together for support and to develop a strategy to deal with the needs of the congregation.”<sup>57</sup> The group called themselves the “Afterpastor”.<sup>58</sup>

The fallout from sexual misconduct affects numerous people and the church. When a new pastor is assigned to this congregation, it will likely be one of the most challenging experiences the pastor will face. The “Afterpastors”<sup>59</sup> describe their experience as follows, “I remember

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<sup>57</sup> Nancy Myer Hopkins, *Restoring the Soul of a Church: Healing Congregations Wounded by Clergy Sexual Misconduct* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1995), 155.

<sup>58</sup> Hopkins, 155.

<sup>59</sup> Hopkins, 155.

struggling with being so mistrusted and wondered what I had done to earn such suspicion”.<sup>60</sup>

Another pastor describes their experience this way:

Many people make career mistakes, and I clearly made a costly ministry career mistake and ended up being the scapegoat/identified patient for a very sick church, which depth of sickness had been hidden from me. It was a church with severe secrets, only some of which were discussed when I had interviewed with their search committee, but I suppose I had convinced myself into believing the congregation’s leaders when they said, “We have worked through all our problems.” Foolish me, I believed them and accepted the call.<sup>61</sup>

Being assigned to such a congregation can take a toll on the pastor’s health, family, and vocation. This is why it is essential for a pastor assigned to such a congregation to have specific tools related to sexual misconduct. It is unfortunate that denominational leaders have to be ready for such situations, but it happens. The victims and the church need a pastor. The problem is that the new pastor will bear much of the brunt of a victim’s, congregation’s, community’s criticism, pain, and grief. The tools outlined in this paper will be helpful in these situations, but additional resources will be needed for a pastor to navigate such an emotional and difficult circumstance in a healthy way. The “Afterpastor”<sup>62</sup> group in Minnesota identified several elements that were helpful to them and would be helpful for any pastor following a clergy person accused of sexual misconduct. The first element needed is “adequate information.”<sup>63</sup> Because of confidentiality, a denomination or church leaders may not want to divulge information to the incoming pastor. In part, this is understandable. But if an incoming pastor is going to help a congregation adequately and perhaps the victim (especially if that person is still in the congregation), then the pastor needs to know who was hurt and who needs most attention initially. Critical to know would also

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<sup>60</sup> Hopkins, 156.

<sup>61</sup> Hopkins, 156.

<sup>62</sup> Hopkins, 155.

<sup>63</sup> Hopkins, 161.

be whether the outgoing pastor had committed a crime by this sexual misconduct, for example, by engaging in sexual activities with a minor. Without this information, an incoming pastor will have little chance of helping persons heal or bringing the church back to fruitfulness. Secrecy and mistrust do not build the relationships of trust that are required between pastor and congregation.

The second element identified is “support”.<sup>64</sup> The incoming pastor must have denominational support or a team of pastors with whom to pray and process matters. One person alone cannot help a congregation navigate healing because of sexual misconduct. If key laity and denominational leaders work together with the pastor, healing and fruitfulness is much more likely to happen. Certainly it is true that if a pastor is called or appointed to such a situation, church and denominational leaders believe the pastor has the skills and ability to help the hurting congregation. Nonetheless, the pastor will likely need additional support because of the emotional toll the situation will exert.

The third element is “personal healing.”<sup>65</sup> Many clergy are physically, mentally, and spiritually unhealthy. Because of the nature of sitting, office work, long and erratic hours, many clergy adopt unhealthy lifestyles. The health of clergy is a concern not only for them but for laity and denominational leaders. Through offering incentives, The United Methodist Church is finding ways to encourage and reward clergy to adopt healthier lifestyles, but it is up to the clergy person to participate. The pastor who begins to lead a congregation that has experienced sexual misconduct needs additional support and accountability. Laity and denominational leaders can support the clergy person by offering other resources, regular check-ins from denominational leaders, and accountability partners from key lay leaders in the congregation.

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<sup>64</sup> Hopkins, 162.

<sup>65</sup> Hopkins, 162.

The fourth and final element is “education.”<sup>66</sup> Though most clergy are highly educated, that education rarely includes how to deal with sexual misconduct. That makes it helpful for the Conference or congregation to provide the clergy person with special training. Training and counseling are also often useful for members of the congregation themselves.

### **Conclusion**

With all change, there is grief, for all change includes loss. Both clergy and laity experience loss in pastoral transition. There is the potential for loss in relationships, ministries ending, and time invested, to name a few. The danger for clergy and churches that experience high turnover rates in pastors, such as every three years or less, is that they become numb to change and ignore the grieving process.

In a CBS television show called *Seal Team*, the characters often repeat the mantra “Ignore and Override!” To complete their mission, they have to “ignore and override” their emotions and difficulties. I find clergy and laity in The United Methodist Church tend to “ignore and override” when it comes to pastoral transition. It seems easier than acknowledging the pain involved with change.

The problem with “ignoring and overriding” one’s circumstances is that the emotional toll eventually catches up with all of us, and the fallout can be devastating. For clergy, the fallout could be burnout, and the clergy person may quit ministry altogether. For laity, decades of loss and grief build up over time to the point that laity sometimes either do not even try to get close to their new pastor or may sabotage the ministry because they are still grieving the loss of their last pastor—or one from fifty years ago.

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<sup>66</sup> Hopkins, 163.

My hope and prayer for clergy and laity are that in understanding the grieving process of a church and the conflict that can arise because of this unresolved grief, clergy may have some extra tools to help a church navigate through these difficult times. Pastoring a church in conflict is never easy, but with God's help, it can be done. If one can imagine standing among the Hebrews when Moses was anointing Joshua to succeed him, one could sense fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and grief. Moses led them for forty years, and Joshua was young and a different leader. These comparisons are something that all clergy must handle when entering into a ministry relationship with a new congregation. Still, like between Moses and Joshua, God is in the midst of the change, and God can bring healing to the hurting, conflicted congregation.



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