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Getting to Acquainted: How a Pastor Can Get to Know His Congregation

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BYLINE: Dr. Alan Ehler

PULL QUOTES: “Although every church needs positive change to remain vital, a new pastor is wise to make getting to know the new congregation one of his first priorities.”

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Pastors often make the mistake of assuming their new congregations are just like the ones they left. Thinking that everything will work just as it did at their previous church, a pastor may be eager to implement the same ministry strategies and approaches in his new congregation. However, a church does not begin on its new pastor’s first Sunday. When a pastor assumes—wrongly—that he has full understanding of his new church and its needs, he can cause a great deal of trouble for himself and the church.

Even the apostle Paul understood that ministry must be contextualized. He preached in an entirely different way among the Greek philosophers on Athens’ Mars Hill in Acts 17:22-31 than he did among the Jews of Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13:16-41. He spoke the language of each group, cited sources they considered authoritative and addressed the topics that mattered to them, even though they differed greatly. Although every church needs positive change to remain vital, a new pastor is wise to make getting to know the new congregation one of his first priorities.

Understanding the Church

Although some churches may be facing crises that require immediate action upon the pastor’s arrival, most strategic change will have a far greater impact if the people of the church love and trust their leader, understand the reason for the change in leadership their new pastor brings and see how the change will bring about an outcome that matters to them. A pastor new to the church can intentionally schedule “listening appointments” in order to understand the congregation and come to know and love its people.

There are two key purposes for this process. The first is the building of rapport. People are far more likely to follow a leader they love and one they know loves them. Although the title of “pastor” brings some credibility, trust and rapport increases as the pastor builds relationships and listens to the people.

The second purpose is to discover some key elements of the church in order to make the healthiest and most effective long-term change. These elements are:

Strengths. Every church that has survived more than a couple of years has some areas of strength. People have specific reasons to continue attending and giving to a particular church. These strengths can provide a solid foundation on which to build healthy ministries. A well-meaning new pastor may kill effective ministries right away while trying to implement his

preferred ministry models or put his own stamp on the church. However, these kinds of changes undermine the trust of the people and eliminate need-meeting ministries that may remain valuable and life-giving for years to come.

Values. Discovering what people care about most can provide a basis for healthy change. Asking questions about formerly effective ministries that people still love, though these ministries are no longer vital, can reveal the underlying values of the church and its people. For example, a church that tries to maintain a Sunday school bus ministry may seem like a dinosaur in today's society laden with fear of child molestation. However, listening to stories of bus ministry success in the 1970s may reveal that the people still love the idea of reaching unchurched, impoverished children with the gospel. Buses may not be the best way to do that anymore, but funding an overseas orphanage, starting a Saturday outreach to kids in a rough neighborhood or even launching a new church targeting the marginalized can be a way to harness that value in a more productive way that both newcomers and old timers can celebrate.

Speed bumps and road blocks. People who have attended a church a long time may not be aware of its barriers and hindrances to growth and effectiveness. The pastor should search for road blocks that have prevented the congregation's growth or speed bumps that have limited its ministry effectiveness. These may be congregational attitudes and habits, spiritual matters or physical limitations. An example of the latter is inadequate parking. The size of the sanctuary doesn't matter if people have to walk more than a half-mile to enter the doors of the church.

Other speed bumps and road blocks may not be as obvious as the parking situation. For instance, some churches may seem friendly to regular attenders while making it difficult for newcomers to feel welcomed, build relationships and get involved. The long-timers may love to greet one another and invite one another over but not take time to get to know the newcomers. While unintentional, the feeling of being snubbed can drive visitors away from a church that appears unwelcoming. The new leader will need to listen to those who have started attending recently to assess the true level of hospitality of his church. Newcomers also may not feel welcome if all the church's ministry leaders and board members have been attending for more than 10 years, indicating a road block for newcomer involvement.

Listening to the Church

The new pastor can discover the strengths, values, speed bumps and road blocks through listening and study. People love to talk when another, especially a spiritual leader, is willing to listen. The new pastor can fill his calendar with appointments in the office, meetings over lunch or coffee, or time together in homes. Sincere, active listening communicates respect, value and concern.

Of course, key leaders should be the new pastor's top priority, but other attenders can also give the pastor insight into the church. The pastor may discover some latent talent and unique elements of the church's story to share when leading future change.

A wise pastor will also meet with his predecessor. Depending on the circumstances of the departure, the former pastor may present a tainted view of the church, but this perspective can be invaluable in revealing issues and strengths in a church.

A pastor should also begin early to get to know new attenders to the church. Newcomers are far more likely to stay and get involved in a congregation in which the leadership seeks to know and listen to them.

The goal in all of these meetings is to listen. Of course, it is fair to allow the people to ask about the pastor's own story and values, but at least 70 percent of each conversation should be spoken by others. The pastor should have some open-ended questions in mind that can draw others out, such as asking how they came to faith in Christ, what brought them to the church, what they love most about their church and what they would like to see changed.

Studying the Church

The pastor is also wise to study the church through objective means. Researching the congregation's history will reveal high and low points and indicate what the church has done well in the past and where it has struggled. Sometimes the highlight of a church's history can become a road block as people get stuck trying to return to the glory days. The pastor can read old business meeting minutes, consult denominational records and search for other sources. These findings may confirm or refute what the people perceive as their church's strengths and weaknesses and help persuade people to buy in to change when it does come.

The pastor should also study the community. Demographic information is available from the U.S. Census Bureau and in even more detail from companies like Percept and MissionInsite. Talking with people in the community about their values, priorities and opinions of the church can reveal much about how best to target a community for outreach.

Finally, the pastor should study by observing both people inside and outside the church. In this way, he can determine their values and areas of openness.

Having to take the time to get to know the congregation may frustrate the new pastor eager to bring immediate change in order to take the church to the next level, but an early investment will pay long-term dividends by preventing painful opposition, building trust and discovering the real heart of the church.

BIO: Alan Ehler, Ph.D., is dean of the College of Christian Ministries & Religion and associate professor of religion at Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida.