



Bridging the Gap from Old to New

By Harry Brown, *Isolation in Ministry Task Group Chair*

A New Minister at “Inspiration” United

“Inspiration” United Church awaited the arrival of their recently called minister. The Joint Needs Assessment Committee (JNAC) and Search and Call processes had taken much time and caused considerable angst as the congregation grappled with moving forward after a long-term, comfortable relationship with their now-retired minister. Seeking change in worship style, and wanting to move toward a more community-based ministry, the congregation had called an ordained minister from a successful settlement in a rural area of another province. The congregation felt positive: they envisioned that the ministry change to a younger minister would attract new folks to the congregation.

Two years later, all had not gone as expected. There was general despondency as well as conflict between those who embraced the changes and those who lamented them, desiring the “good old days.” The minister was quietly searching for another call.



Does This Sound Familiar?

The story above is fictional, but it represents the experience of anyone who embraces a call and then finds the situation quite different from what was expected. Those who approach new ministry with clear goals and an understanding of the needs and concerns of congregations in transition seem to bridge that transition—between becoming acquainted and instituting change—with fewer difficulties. The literature bears this out: most scholars on the subject

recommend some sort of entry plan for the first couple of years of ministry.

Fresh starts begin with hope and anticipation. JNAC documents are often visionary, detailing the ideal. While a grace period usually exists, managing everyone’s expectations is very important. Otherwise, isolating factors—disappointment, distrust, and alienation—can occur. Beginning with a well-designed

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and well-articulated plan allows the ministry to bloom and, eventually, to realize the ideals expressed by the congregation in the JNAC document.

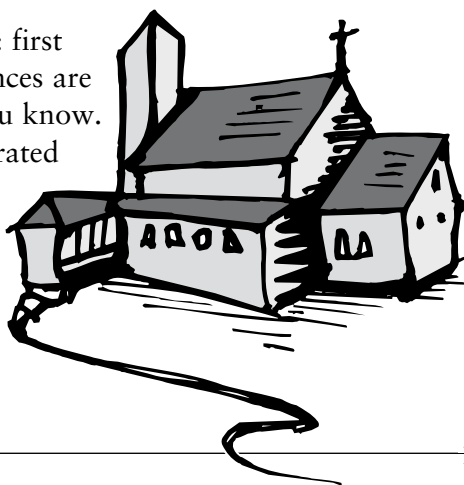
What Makes an Entry Plan Effective?

In the beginning, there is so much to learn about the context of a new ministry: the folks who make up the congregation, the staff, and the presbytery—their values and the cultural setting of the congregation. Then there are the immediate tasks of setting up the office, worship, visitation, and on and on and on. An entry plan that includes setting short-term goals and priorities helps a new minister manage these sometimes overwhelming tasks.

It's important to keep the goals and priorities in an entry plan fairly short-term, three to six months, for example, and to develop them in consultation with church leaders. Keep sharing them and referring back to them often during this period.

There are three obvious priorities for your entry plan in those first few months:

- Get to know people: explain how you intend to do this, such as through visitation, a board retreat, a youth gathering, and attending already established groups.
- Prepare worship: first worship experiences are important, as you know. Provide an integrated experience from the opening to the benediction, keeping some



loved elements of worship and gently introducing new practices.

- Identify (with) the leadership: congregational leaders often carry the congregation through change. They may be officers and committee members or otherwise. It's important to have a positive relationship with the leadership for the ministry to grow.

After four to six months, the ministry personnel and the congregational leaders can begin to revise goals and priorities to meet gaps that still exist and to move ahead with the new ministry.

Of course, there will always be unexpected issues and events, but keeping your focus on the basics—caring for people, worship, and leadership—will keep everyone on track. The most important thing is to keep communication lines open, to allow everyone to work together to fulfill God's mission for the church.



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