

# **SO YOUR PASTOR IS NEW**

*A Group Discussion Guide  
for Congregations  
with First-Time Clergy*

## **Introduction**

Your church has called a new pastor. The pastor your church has called is not only new to your congregation, but new to ordained ministry altogether. Your pastor is a recent seminary graduate, newly ordained, and excited about beginning the work he or she has been preparing to do for a long period of years.

Your new pastor is fully trained. No doubt the seminary has done an excellent job training its former student for the work of parish ministry. The wider church has been of help, too, carefully shepherding this individual through the process that leads from the initial call to the service to ordination.

### ***A Wonderful Opportunity***

Now your church has a wonderful opportunity. You can welcome your new pastor into the exciting work he or she has been readying to do. How you receive and respond to this newly ordained minister of the gospel can do much to lay a solid foundation for all the future work this minister will do, both in your church and in the subsequent churches God will summon this pastor to serve.

Sadly, what happens in your church also has the potential of sidetracking this person's future in ministry, even to the point where discouragement leads him or her to leave pastoral ministry for some other work or calling.

You cannot control the future, but you can take positive steps to help your new pastor fall in love with ministry and further develop the patterns and practices that keep a person growing as year leads to year.

### ***The Purpose of This Discussion Guide***

This simple six-session discussion guide is offered as a way of beginning. The hope is that the conversations begun in this way can foster in your congregation the kind of culture conducive to a healthy first-time ministry.

The six sessions begin with parishioners, their particular church and community, and move toward topics that are more personal for the pastor. Parishioners who participate in these discussions should look upon themselves as learners right along with the pastor. There very well can be much they can learn about church, community, and ministry itself, even if they have been around the church for many, many years! That is the beauty and long-term effectiveness of this kind of conversation: it helps pastor and people encounter, name, and openly contend with assumptions, expectations, unwritten rules, and other issues that have the potential for disruption.

## ***The Way to Begin***

You are among the people who know your congregation best, so you are in a better position to know how to set up a discussion of this nature in your church. But here are some suggestions.

- Recruit participants you know to be kind, positive, generous and forthcoming with their observations. It is important that these sessions do not become occasions for new complaining or the rehashing of old grievances.
- Help the folks recruited to know they are not on board to train the pastor, “fix” what the seminary did wrong, or make the pastor be what you want a pastor to be and do what you want a pastor to do. That will not be helpful, either to the pastor or the church! Think of this work more like the “fitting room” of a clothing store: there a many ways, all legitimate, to do pastoral ministry; new pastors need healthy and helpful opportunities to try some of them on for size.
- Do not ask or expect your pastor to lead these sessions. A trusted layperson should take the lead, moderating the sessions. No specialized training in ministry is required on the part of the leader, only a willingness to keep the discussion moving forward and, alas, the courage to keep someone from monopolizing the floor.
- No session should go longer than 90 minutes.

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## **Session One: Getting to Know Your Church**

Your new pastor has read your church’s profile and has studied it with care. He or she has already begun to explore your congregation’s traditions, meet its people, and discover the way your church goes about – or at least thinks it goes about – its life and ministry.

You have been around this congregation for some length of time, perhaps all your life. You know it well. You know its character and its characters. You know its traditions and its taboos. You know its building as well as you know the rooms in your own house. Doesn’t everybody?

No! Everybody doesn’t. The new pastor certainly does not, at least not yet. And, when it comes down to it, you may not either! Welcome to the world of assumptions! Welcome to the realm of expectations! Welcome to the life of negotiating the maze of unwritten rules!

The aim of this session is to share stories and both learn and name as much about the congregation as possible in 90 minutes. Enter into this conversation with joy and watch excitement about your church begin to grow. New discoveries can be made and trust can build.

Let the pastor function as a listener in this session, though he or she may be free to ask follow-up questions. Allow time near the end for the pastor to speak about his or her home congregation.

1. How long have you been a member of this congregation? What drew you to be part of this church? What keeps you here?
2. Where do you sit in the sanctuary? Why?
3. Begin with the end of the summer or the start of fall. What are the red-letter dates on your church's calendar? What are the particular traditions associated with each one? If you know the history behind a particular practice in your church, please share your understanding.
4. Looking back over the calendar just compiled, which of the days described is your favorite?
5. Who in your congregation arranges for the observation of the special days? Who does the decorating? Who puts things away? Where do the decorations go?
6. Of all the traditions you have named, what is one you hope never changes? What if that one did change?
7. After everyone has been allowed to speak, allow the pastor to share much the same regarding traditions from his or her Christian experience? Which tradition was favorite? Which one will be missed the most if it is not able to happen here?

## **Session Two: Getting to Know Your Town**

Your church does not exist in isolation. It is situated in a particular community, or, if in a city, in a particular neighborhood. The previous session explored the open and hidden history of the congregation; this session does much the same only with regard to the community or neighborhood.

Since congregations do not exist in isolation, pastoral ministry does not take place in isolation. It happens in the community inhabited by the congregations. That means it is affected by its environment, which, just like the church, is fraught with assumptions and expectations.

Something new the first-time pastor will be trying on in ministry is the fact that he or she is a public person in your community. Soon enough your new minister will be recognized by people he or she has no way of recognizing. This is, of course, unavoidable, especially if your town is small.

In this session, parishioners will gain a sense of what it means to live in the “fish bowl” of being a public person in your town, and the pastor will come to know more about this wider community and how to live in it. Something you are helping the pastor watch for is any kind of assumption, expectation, or unwritten rule that may prove to be a hurdle, if not a roadblock or stumbling stone.

Again, let the pastor function primarily as a listener for most of the period. Save some time near the end to allow the pastor to reflect a bit about his or her hometown or other community from the past.

1. What is the best part about living in this community?
2. What is difficult about living in this community?
3. How do you imagine people younger than you would answer questions 1 and 2? People older?
4. Where do parishioners work? Are there shopkeepers in the church or practitioners of any of the trades? Lawyers? Doctors? [*Note: here you are not commenting on the quality of services, prices, or any such thing. You are only helping the new pastor know the lay of the land.*]
5. What do the people of this town do for fun?
6. Are there community-wide events or festivals planned by the town? How do these impact the church’s life and program?
  - a. How important is it for your church’s pastor to attend these events? Is that realistic?

- b. Is alcohol served at any of these events or festivals? Regardless of the congregation's or the community's perceptions in this regard, a pastor is free to follow his or her conscience in this regard, but talk openly in this setting about the implications of the minister publicly partaking of alcoholic beverages. Are there implications in publicly declining to participate?
7. Without falling into gossip or envy, briefly discuss the other churches in town.
8. How does your church relate to the community?
9. Invite the pastor to tell of a community from his or her past.

### **Session Three: Getting to Know the Work of Ministry, Part I: The Parishioner's Perspective**

Ministry is a very broad enterprise. There is no one style or model of ministry that is correct. There are a variety of ways to do the work of the pastoral office, and all of them can be legitimate and effective.

New pastors enter the work believing they have a style or model of ministry that feels good, makes sense to them, and is faithful to the gospel and to best practices. As a new pastor lives into the work, that style or model may or may not prove to be as good a fit as it seemed in seminary. New clergy need the freedom to try on other styles or models for size.

Experimentation along these lines calls for understanding on the part of parishioners. It is helpful to the new pastor to have a set of allies in the congregation who know about this need for trying out various styles or models, for these allies can help foster in the congregation one of the greatest gifts a first church can give a first-time pastor: the freedom to fail.

The purpose of this session is to help laypeople begin to envision all that pastoral ministry entails. For the most part, perceptions, assumptions, and expectations held by the laity have developed around the styles of the pastors they have previously known. An honest naming of these preconceptions should make for a fertile discussion.

Without relying upon input from the pastor, ask and answer the following questions about the work associated with the pastoral office.

1. What does a minister do? Make a list of tasks you think a pastor performs.
2. Where do your ideas of what a pastor does come from?

3. If you were a pastor, how would you structure your day? What would be your favorite task? What would be your least favorite?
4. Assign a length of time to each activity you have named. How much time does each activity take?
5. Look back over your list and the amount of time spent. Is your list realistic?
6. Give your list a working label – one term that you think encompasses or describes a minister’s work. (This is a metaphor or model for ministry, and it can be guiding in the way a pastor structures his or her time and priorities.) Is the pastor *primarily* a teacher, shepherd, counselor, administrator, preacher, organizer, or some other such thing?
7. Identify other occupations which you think are similar to the work of a pastor.
8. What does it mean to be ordained?
9. What are the requirements leading up to ordination? Why has the church deemed these requirements necessary?

## **Session Four: Getting to Know the Work of Ministry,** **Part II: The Pastor’s View**

One of the recurring themes we have discovered in our work thus far is that pastoral ministry is not one-size-fits-all. There are a number of styles of ministry, but not every style is a good fit for every pastor. Clergy in their first several years in the ministry are at work donning various styles until they find the one that seems to suit them best for the situation they currently occupy.

The point is, ministry is largely self-defined. A pastor is free, within certain perimeters, to conduct the work the way he or she deems best. Carefully articulating to the congregation the self-definition the pastor is operating under can stem the tide of criticism, though it cannot avoid criticism altogether. Significant allies in the congregation who understand this notion of legitimate self-definition can be of immense help to the pastor who is new. These allies can help potential critics realize that the new pastor is not doing things wrong just because he or she does not do them the way a venerable predecessor did.

Thus this session continues the rich discussion begun in the previous session, only this time from the pastor’s perspective. Previous sessions tried to unearth hidden perceptions, assumptions, and expectations in the church and in the community. This time the focus is on what the pastor assumes, expects, and projects.

Proceed this way. Allow the pastor the floor, and listen to learn about his or her approach to pastoral ministry. Be slow to offer advice. Ask only follow-up questions while you pose the following questions to your minister.

1. What led you to think about and to pursue ordination?
2. Who are some of the role models who help you understand the tasks of ministry?
3. What is the dominate metaphor you use toward understanding and explaining ministry?
4. What are you eager to do in ministry? What are you most curious about? What are you most anxious about?
5. How do you envision structuring your time? What will a day look like? What will a week look like?
6. By what title do you wish to be called? Answer this in terms of both formal and informal address.

### **Session Five: Getting to Know the Transition from Seminary into Ministry**

Session Five brings us to the most personal of sessions for the pastor. Here is the issue. As the weeks and months progress, the members of the church will reminisce about, and perhaps grieve over, the previous years, often mentioning and mourning the loss of the former pastor and the interim most recently gone. All this is to be expected as the church is leaving someone and something behind.

But so is the pastor! All the talk of the former minister and the interim can leave the new minister feeling as though he or she is not being given a chance to get started and be appreciated. Meanwhile, as a recent seminary graduate, as one newly transferred from lay status in the church to a position of ordained leadership, the new minister, though excited to make new beginnings, is simultaneously mourning losses, for he or she has left much behind, too.

By understanding this part of your new pastor's present-day experience, you can be mindful of his or her heart and of pains the pastor might not feel ready to express.

The questions below are for the pastor, giving him or her an opportunity to speak about what is being left behind.

1. What was your favorite class in seminary?
2. Who was your favorite professor? What made this professor so likeable?
3. Who were your closest friends in seminary?
4. How can the church help you maintain connection with your school? With the people who have meant the most to you?
5. What was your family's (your spouse's/your partner's) tradition around Christmas or other holidays? Will any of that be able to be carried on now that you are a pastor?
6. In seminary you were a member of a class. Now you are the pastor of a church. Then you could sit wherever you wished and be one of a group of many. Now you alone are up front without immediate colleagues on the "job site." How are you experiencing this transition?
7. We expect you to take at least one day off each week. Which day will it be? How can the members of the church help keep it secure?
8. We expect you to be able to make the most of your vacation time. Is the amount of vacation time we are allowing adequate? Will you take these weeks all at once, or will you spread them out through the year?

## **Session Six: Getting to Know the Plan for the Coming Days in Ministry**

The conversations that have been enjoyed over the last five sessions have raised a number of issues that will require vigilance. As with Jesus' parable about the two builders, the essential thing is not simply hearing about these issues but in doing something about them. This concluding session is practical, leading toward a plan of action. The group that has gathered for these weeks should not merely indicate that something should be done; it should look especially to what it will do for the pastor's and the congregation's growth and well-being.

1. What systems are in place in your congregation to provide the pastor with regular, positive feedback? How will you provide positive feedback?
2. If there is no system in place for regular, positive feedback, how can this group begin to advocate for one to be established? [*Note: in seminary the student received feedback from the professor, if not earlier, at the end of each semester and the expectations for the semester were laid out clearly at the beginning of the semester. Can this take place in the church?*]
3. What systems are in place to provide the pastor with constructive criticism? Who will help the pastor distinguish between constructive criticism and the merely critical?
4. How can the congregation work together to dissuade its cranks, assuming it has its share?
5. Where does the pastor have opportunity to offer the congregation constructive criticism? How can this group help the pastor maintain the courage to offer this kind of critique?
6. How will we encourage and support the pastor in developing relationships with ministerial colleagues, family members, and friends outside church and ministry?
7. The new pastor will want to try new ideas. How will you help encourage their success?
8. How will you foster open communication?