



The Grapevine

CONNECTING THE CONGREGATIONS OF THE PRESBYTERY OF DETROIT

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Do Something Else



by the Rev. Dr.
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The new Senior Pastor at the Kirk in the Hills, Dr. Nate Phillips, challenges us with his new book, *Do Something Else* (Eugene Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016). Nate grew up at the Mission of the Eastward (MATE) in Maine. MATE has received much attention over the years because it continues to serve Jesus Christ in the rural areas of Maine. I know the mission first hand because it was the site of my first mission trip, and it was under the guidance of Scott Planting, who is highlighted in this book. When I talked with the Rev. Planting at Dr. Phillips' installation service at the Kirk in the Hills, I found that it was his first mission group too. My youth group from Sparta, New Jersey, helped to turn a Ford dealership into a community center. Nate Phillips' roots go deep in the MATE.

One of the phrases Carl Geores, founder of MATE was, "God has not called us here to die: so do

something" (Phillips, 6). Nate Phillips describes a group that worked on the porch of his house, probably not even noticing Nate, but applauds them for doing something. This book takes mission to a deeper level. Nate's point is that Christ calls us to join him in the world and do his work. Many of our churches have stopped trying anything new. They sit discouraged in worship week after week, feeling hopeless about their ministry. Meanwhile, outside their doors sit the lost and the lonely, the poor and the homeless. He urges us, "Do Something Else."

The first topic Dr. Phillips addresses is that organizations have need for different styles of leaders in their life. Previous churches needed "captains," those who would forge a new ministry. And once founded, the church needed "CEOs" who would organize the efforts, and oversee administration. Even MATE evolved through these stages, and now has a leader who is a community organizer. This is the evolving role of a pastor. A community organizer helps people in the community

to assess strengths that can be shared, discover concerns that affect the quality of life, and then bring people with concerns and gifts together to address community needs. The point is that when the church serves its community, the community will see the pastor and church as a leader who can improve the quality of life.

If we are to demonstrate the gospel, Dr. Phillips says, the church also addresses the need to be an inclusive community that involves all people, especially in leadership. He cites examples of pastors, elders and members who come from different races and genders and have much to offer. What are we doing to reach out to our neighbor?

So what is the church called to be and do? The book includes a chapter by Matthew Bruce, on the nature and calling of the church. Bruce reviews the common definitions of the church as a place with great worship, programs, and outreach. Top that off with a great Sunday school and youth

program. But is that the purpose of the church? Yes, that model equips the members for ministry. But if ministry stops there, are we following Christ's commission, to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations...", then we have missed our calling. The church is not only a gathered, called out community. It is the body of Christ. "And as the body of Christ, its task is to serve others. The church serves others by making Christ known" (Phillips, 35).

Following his definitions of the church, Part II includes many examples of areas of that church

the church could do something new. They are examples of ministry that "do something else." Here are possible areas a church could venture into new ministry, with great examples:

- Worship – using ancient practices and technology to engage people in faith
- Starting new churches – established congregations initiating new worship communities
- Evangelism - giving ourselves to the people in our lives, demonstrating our faith
- Outreach – moving from mission that is "hand-out" to "hand-in-hand"

- Church enterprises – churches in the ministry business of social enterprise
- Cooperative parishes – by uniting, churches can offer more

Do Something Else! Dr. Phillips provides a challenge. I suggest that pastors and sessions study this book and ask, "What is God inviting us to do differently? What is the something else our church could do to lift Christ's word and work into the world?" Look at these models of new life and have holy conversations about what relationships God might be encouraging you to build.

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MISTAKES CHURCHES MAKE DURING AN INTERIM MINISTRY

After thirty years of service, the pastor of Community Pine Church retired. For the majority of members, he was the only church pastor they had ever experienced. Lay leaders quickly formed a search committee to get started on finding an interim pastor. Any step that might delay them seemed a waste of precious time. They feared the months between pastors could deplete resources and members' energy. After some discussion, the committee produced a vague document about the congregation and the kind of leader they were seeking.

Avoiding the Familiar Missteps

The transition time between a departing pastor and a regularly called and installed permanent pastor presents an extraordinary opening for possible transformation. Too many churches miss this infrequent opportunity because of confusion or haste.

Fuzzy expectations. Lay leaders in a rush to put the word out tend to skip the essential first step of discussing their expectations for the interim minister. What are the duties they want the interim to perform? What responsibilities are the highest priorities? After reaching an agreement on these questions, the committee draws up a contract or covenant, which specifies some of the following duties: preaching, administering baptism and communion, conducting funerals and weddings, performing administrative duties, supervising other church staff, contributing to church communications (bulletins, newsletters, and social media), and providing pastoral care.

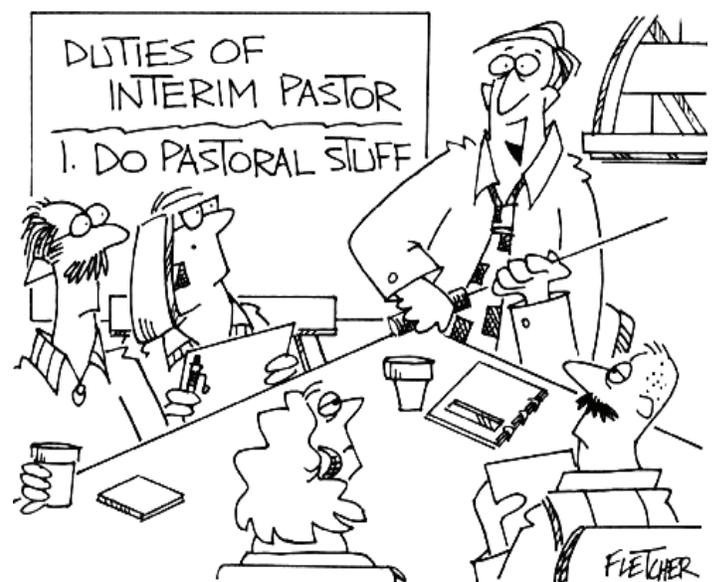
Process matters. A bad process for hiring an interim pastor leads to a bad decision. Process is not about what happens, but how decisions are made. In panic mode, members circumvent thoughtful conversations with other members and key denominational contacts. Planning for the next step in the congregation's future takes prayer, wisdom, and buy-in from all stakeholders.

Big fights over small issues. Long-time members may hold strong preferences about worship style and church programs. However, insisting on carrying over certain

traditions takes the focus away from the church's central mission and theology. Beware of the "fight and flee syndrome" where a few members stir up a controversy but leave the church instead of seeing it through. Rather than advocating for what "we want," church leaders need a longer-term perspective that points to what is best for the congregation's future.

Delaying controversial decisions. Members so value stability and calm that they put off any action that may generate conflict. For example, the interim period is the best time to deal with problem staff. That way the new pastor begins with a fresh start, unburdened by cleaning up past problems.

Deciding if the interim can be a candidate for permanent pastor. Possibly no other issue proves to be a bigger obstacle. Some denominations prohibit an interim from becoming the regularly called, permanent pastor. Other denominations have loosened the restriction and advise congregations on a case-by-case basis. Regardless, the initial contract or covenant should clearly state whether the interim pastoral position is open for a permanent call or closed to a permanent call. The terms of



"PRODUCTIVE MEETING, FOLKS!...
NOW...ON TO THE NEXT STEP!"

call should also indicate the beginning date and ending date and whether the contract can be renewed (for an example, see Letter of Agreement for Interim Pastor by the Church of the Brethren¹). If this matter is not settled in advance, the congregation spends too much energy on the issue. Invariably, conflict ensues because some members have formed a personal attachment with the pastor already on the scene while others do not see the interim pastor as a good match for the congregation.

The Traditional vs. Intentional Approach

Two different broad strategies capture the congregation's leadership choices during an interim period.

Traditional approach. In the traditional approach, the church searches for someone to keep the doors open and help the congregation tread water. The interim minister's role is seen as providing stability and keeping all programs and ministries running. The goal in this approach is not to move the church in any particular direction. A local retired pastor may be asked to provide this type of leadership to prevent the church from losing momentum. Certainly an experienced pastor, serving as an interim, can maintain and enhance the church's ministry.

Intentional approach. Congregations making this strategic decision see this in-between time as a transitional window. They ask for someone with an adaptive leadership style who will serve for a designated period to resolve conflict, create space for grief or anger some members may feel from losing their previous pastor, and assist with efforts to identify future goals and priorities. This approach emphasizes transformation and renewal rather than continuity. The biblical role model for this approach is John the Baptist, who God called to prepare the way for the one who would follow him.²

Traits of an Effective Interim Pastor

Interim pastors share the same characteristics as other effective pastors. However, many interim pastors have special training and experience serving as an interim in other churches. Many interim pastors feel called to do interim ministry as their unique, long-term call. Flexibility and listening skills are essential because every congregation presents one-of-a-kind ministry challenges.

As the search committee screens candidates, look for:

- Years of experience as a pastor
- Specialized training for interim pastors³
- History of service (number of churches and years at each one)

- Excellent references
- Evidence of life-long learning
- Current on ministry approaches

Above all, a pastor's leadership style has to match the congregation's needs. In reality, in most churches, members hold different views on leadership. Some want a transformational leader, a pastor who would bring new ideas and create a common vision. Other members want an inspiring leader, a pastor who would encourage lay leaders' gifts and share leadership with them. Another faction feels most comfortable with a servant leader, a pastor who puts the needs of others first and takes care of current members. Do the majority of members prefer a lay-directed congregation where lay leaders come up with most initiatives and make most of the major decisions? Or do the majority of members feel more comfortable with a pastor-directed congregation where the pastor makes most of the decisions? Or do most members want to share leadership with a pastor where a pastor inspires and encourages members to make decisions and take action?

Interim Ministry Blessings

As a congregation prepares for new leadership, the pause yields many benefits. The church can hit the "re-boot" or "re-start" and find unexpected renewal and energy. Members become more responsible for the church's ministry and claim its mission as their own.

The conventional view was that there was no way to fail as an interim pastor. If the interim pastor performed poorly, then that pastor just made the next pastor look better! If the interim pastor's leadership was excellent, then the new pastor gained a better foundation to build on for the future. However, this perspective fails to account for the extensive damage an ineffective interim leader can do. The first rule of wise leadership is "do no harm." A second principle is also important: "Ministry is never about the minister; it is always about the gospel the minister proclaims."⁴

1. <http://www.brethren.org/ministryoffice/documents/interim-ministry-resource.pdf>.

2. Ibid.

3. For example, training by the Interim Ministry Network (<https://imnedu.org/>) and many denominations. See also Transitional Ministry Education Consortium, <https://www.transitionalministryeducation.net/>.

4. Daniel O. Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), xi.

DOES OUR PASTOR NEED A JOB DESCRIPTION?

“I love our pastor and his family, but I don’t know if I can sit through another one of his sermons!” Other members made similar remarks that eventually reached the ears of Paul, chair of the personnel committee, who was asked to call a meeting to deal with members’ growing frustration. Paul felt nervous about setting up an unexpected meeting with the pastor because the personnel committee typically meets only once a year. However, the committee had never discussed with the pastor their expectations about sermon preparation vs. other priorities and time commitments.

What Are Our Expectations?

Serving a church without a written job description is like embarking on a long trip without a road map. Too many churches have no evaluation process in place for the pastor. Additionally, there is often not a personnel committee (or staff-parish relations or pastoral relations committee) or, if there is one, it meets only “as needed.”

Why does the congregation need a committee that deals with clergy/staff and member relationships? Simply put: the church cannot succeed unless the pastor also succeeds. The committee’s central role is to clarify expectations on both sides. If communication lines are down, the result is confusion, disappointment, and possibly conflict. The committee helps the pastor, lay leaders, and members do a better job in their ministries. Regular communication adds years of effective tenure to the pastor’s ministry with the church. Additionally, the regular interaction contributes to the pastor’s overall ministry satisfaction and the pastor learns things about the church that he or she would never learn otherwise.

How to Create a Job Description

Perhaps lay leaders resist developing a pastoral job description because they falsely believe that all pastors are alike: interchangeable parts in the larger church system. Or maybe they feel that as members they do not know as much about the specifics as clergy would

know. However, the goal is for lay leaders and the pastor to work together to design a position portrait that fits the unique values and priorities of their church. In the church context, a pastoral job description serves as a shared vision for the congregation’s ministries. It gives details to the covenant that both members and the pastor hope to fulfill. In crafting this covenant, ask the pastor to provide answers to the following eight questions.

1. Describe in two or three sentences the purpose of your position: what goals that relate to the church’s overall mission can be accomplished through your responsibilities?
2. List and describe three activities that require the largest percentage of your time. What percentage of your time do you estimate each of those activities consumes?
3. List and describe other activities that take up less of your time (occasionally, monthly, or annually).
4. What are your top priorities; what activities do you feel are most important?



“WHEN ASKED TO LIST PROBLEM AREAS THAT TAKE UP MOST OF HIS TIME, THE PASTOR LISTED 3... AND MISPELLED HAROLD’S NAME TWICE.”

5. Among your responsibilities, which roles and goals give you the most satisfaction?
6. Over what decisions do you have direct authority?
7. If applicable, list and describe any responsibilities for supervising the work of or guiding other employees, church volunteers, or committees.
8. What special knowledge or skills are needed in your position?¹

Once the pastor gives his or her responses to the committee, hold a meeting where the pastor and lay committee members discuss and clarify the answers. The committee leadership then drafts a description to be reviewed with the pastor for clarification or correction. Next, the governing board receives the position description and examines whether the wording captures the congregation's understanding of the pastor's role.² Eventually, the entire congregation should be given the opportunity to look at the description and make comments and suggestions.

Responsibilities of the Personnel Committee

The work of facilitating optimal pastor/member relationships should be a top priority for any church. If these relationships aren't right, everything else in the church's ministry will suffer. A thoughtfully constructed framework for each meeting is essential; otherwise, discussion can emphasize the negative and offer no constructive action steps.

In terms of best practices, the committee meets six times a year and at regularly scheduled times. Comprise this committee of duly elected lay members plus the senior pastor. Apply three-year term limits to elected lay members to protect people from burnout and to avoid the appearance that only a few people in the congregation make all the decisions.

Although committee members get the opportunity to identify areas of conflict or disappointment, a regular meeting also allows the pastor, who attends all meetings, to express opinions about how well the governing board is fulfilling its responsibilities to him or her. A key function of the committee is to offer oversight and promptly respond to any matter related to misconduct (such as sexual harassment, mental health issues, alcohol/drug use, or financial misuse). Their charge is to act in accordance with denominational rules and state/national laws.

Every committee member must attend and participate at every meeting. The chair's role involves facilitating conversation around several questions:

- What one or two good things do you see happening in our church?
- What one congregational challenge do you feel our committee may want to consider discussing?

After each committee member has voiced his or her views, the committee chair identifies one or two items for further discussion. As the chair proceeds down the list, he or she guides the discussion for each issue toward a constructive, consensus-based solution. Next, the chair asks members to review any issues from their last meeting. Then, the chair closes the meeting with prayer. Do not allow any committee member to bring up a new concern toward the end of the meeting when there is not sufficient time for a full discussion of the matter, but remind the member to bring up the concern at the beginning of the next meeting.

Describing the Role for a Future Pastor

When the congregation is moving toward filling a vacancy, an up-to-date clergy job description is even more critical. The position portrait keeps the hiring/search committee focused on the pastoral skills and abilities that are most central to the congregation's ministry. Because this description uses behavior and performance as criteria, it helps a search committee explore what candidates have actually done. Past performance is the best predictor of future behavior.³

Giving Support and Solutions

When Paul convened the personnel committee, he asked each member to list three positive words or phrases to describe the pastor's sermons and then to list phrases suggesting positive changes. After gathering the sheets, Paul read the lists aloud. After discussion, the members supported the pastor's decision to join a local weekly lectionary study group. They also offered support for the several activities the pastor wished to set aside to give him more time for study, prayer, and sermon preparation. Committee members pledged to pray for the pastor and agreed to meet again in two months to assess progress.

1. Additional details in *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 21*, <https://www.theparishpaper.com/sites/default/files/resources/Church%20Effectiveness%20Nuggets-%20Volume%2021.pdf>.

2. As with all congregational committees, the personnel committee is accountable to the governing board.

3. Rich Birch, "8 Axioms of Church Staff Hiring," <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/310141-8-axioms-church-staff-hiring-rich-birch.html>.