

Consider the Children of the Church

Planning for the Impact of a Change in Pastors

At the time of a clergy transition, an often-overlooked population group is the children of our church. The National Association of School Psychologists states that there are five major settings in which children often experience stress. One of those is new, unfamiliar or unpredictable situations. When a child's familiar pastor is replaced by another, there is a period of time that needs to be handled with sensitivity and reassurance.

Be aware that if a pastor has been in one location for several years, it is likely that this person is the only pastor many children ever remember having. While the extent of their relationship with the children of a given congregation will vary from pastor to pastor, don't underestimate the significance of even a vague familiarity with "that person in the robe."

What can we do to help?

1. Help the new pastor connect with the children of the congregation.

- Talk about the fact that another pastor will be coming, not the same person, but someone else they will learn about and get to know.
- Help them remember times that other people they know moved away for particular reasons, yet this didn't mean that they didn't still care about them.
- Pastors, parents, Sunday school teachers, etc. should create opportunities to simply listen (and answer questions when asked) about how children are describing the change and their feelings about this.
- It's OK for adults to share their feelings with children, i.e., "Yes, I'm also sad that Pastor Helen is leaving, and I will miss her, and I'm certainly glad we will have a new pastor coming."
- Help children to have a role in farewell celebrations for the departing pastor. Encourage children to make remembrances, drawings, paintings, pose for photos, videos, etc., for them to give or show to the departing pastor.
- Help them look forward to the new pastor by asking such things as, "What do you want to know about our new pastor when they get here?" and "What would you like to tell our new pastor about yourself? About our church?"
- Create an intentional plan for how children will be introduced to the new pastor. Consider having a Zoom meeting (or other video-conferencing platform) just to introduce the incoming pastor just to the children. A dedicated time with the children maybe at the early part of a Zoom meeting with adults (like the SPRC), but make sure you spend quality time with the children as well.
- If the pastor is expected to lead a "Children's Time" during worship, have a familiar adult also be present for two or three Sundays, helping to introduce the new pastor to the children.

2. If applicable, how do we help the transition of the children of the new pastor or the departing pastor?

- Organize appropriate welcome/farewell activities such as a congregational drive by the parsonage, to bring balloons, welcome/farewell goodies, and gifts.
- If the new pastor has younger/youth age children, make sure they too are introduced not only to the children of the congregation, but to the adults as well. This portion could be the beginning or ending part of a Zoom meeting for adults (SPRC, FINANCE, STAFF, etc.)
- During an introductory Zoom call, encourage the congregation to engage the children by asking for their "favorites" (ice cream flavor, movie, snack, sports team, color etc.) and then try to connect members of the congregation who may have similar choices.
- Intentionally include the younger/youth age children of a departing pastor in the farewell Zoom calls or blessings in appropriate ways.