



# Making God-Honoring Pastoral Transitions

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*A Leadership Transition Process  
for the Classes of the  
Far West Region, RCA*

## Introduction

There is probably no greater event in the life of a congregation than the process of discerning whom God has prepared to lead the church in its next season of ministry.

Most Christians will not be on a leadership team when a pastoral transition occurs. If they are, it may be the only time it happens for them. In other words, few have the practical experience of being involved in a God-honoring pastoral transition. So, we desire to come along side of those in the church who are involved in this process and in some leadership position. They can benefit from the wisdom and perspective that comes from classis and regional experiences.

There are a number of common mistakes churches make in the transition process:

1. They move too quickly and often miss important elements to the process
2. They get the wrong people on the search team.
3. They compile what everyone wants and that becomes what they are looking for.
4. They do not have agreement between key decision-making groups.
5. They fail to do a careful congregational self-examination to deal with systemic issues that may hinder the next pastor and the future ministry of the congregation.
6. They focus on membership more than mission.
7. They lean to what most people want, rather than what everyone needs.
8. They do not establish a transition team to create and oversee all the steps, keeping everyone appropriately informed throughout the process.
9. They do not understand the “leadership vacuum” and how it can be filled by marginal people/groups who see this as an opportunity to (re)assert their own agenda.
10. Etc. ...

We want to experience God-Honoring pastoral transitions. We will look at them in two parts:

Part One—People/Group Descriptions  
*Who are the people and groups involved?*

Part Two—The Guided Search Process  
*What are the strategic steps in the search process?*

## **Part One—People/Group Descriptions**

In any pastoral transition, there can be several distinct people or groups that must be considered, coordinated and honored throughout any pastoral transition (the pastor who is leaving or has left, paid and unpaid staff, consistory, congregation, etc.).

The following descriptions are intended to explain how the Classes of the Far West Region are finding a more discerning and effective path for a pastoral search.

You will see different groups and roles identified. These are intended to help you see different components of a successful pastoral transition and how we can come alongside in helping you through the transition process. God bless you as you enter this time of transition.

### **1. Consistory**

The Consistory carries the final authority for the local church. With careful discernment and prayer, they appoint a Transition Team and a Search Team. They oversee, assist and cooperate with each as needed. The Consistory listens and weighs with wisdom the work of these teams in creating a strategic timeline, the preparation of both church and candidate profiles, and the final submission of a future candidate.

It is important that the Consistory first confirm the missional direction of the church before appointing these teams so the energies of the teams go in a clear and affirmed direction. This avoids a search process that ends with a candidate who does not fit the missional direction of the church or is incongruent with its leadership.

The consistory should also take great care in appointing individuals to the Transition and Search Teams whose lives are marked by spiritual maturity and whose service will uphold the missional values of the church. These individuals should have a capacity to see the whole ministry and shouldn't see themselves as representing any particular subgroup of the congregation. They should be proven people of discernment who show godly wisdom in their decision-making.

By taking enough time to confirm the missional direction of the church and to prudently form the Transition and Search Teams, the consistory ensures a more successful search process that brings capable leadership to your next season of ministry.

The leaving pastor may have valuable input or possible members for the Transition Team and Search Team.

## 2. Transition Team

The Transition Team establishes and oversees a timeline of the entire transition process. They lay out how the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved work together to bring about a successful pastoral transition.

These parties may include, but are not limited to, the roles of Consistory, Search Team, Senior Pastor, Staff, etc. The Transition Team oversees the transition process that is approved by Consistory. It manages and monitors the process to make sure all involved parties are getting their work done in a timely manner. The Transition Team does not do the work! They keep the groups or individuals accountable to their part of the process.

The Transition Team can also be vital in making sure good communication is happening between everyone involved. This allows each group to be more effective in carrying out their role.

In a larger, staff-driven church, it would be prudent to consider some staff participation in the Transition Team and/or Search Team

*Team of 4 people: The composition of the Transition Team involves both church and classis components. First, the Transition Team should be made up of three members from the congregation who are good relationally, understand the possible components or groups responsible for transition, and who can gracefully speak the truth in love. These members can come from the existing consistory, the greater consistory, or the body at large. The classis component involves the regional strategist (or another Classis designated person) to help provide outside resources, assistance, and perspective to the process. This person is important to discovering components of the transition that might not be seen or brought up by those within the congregation.*

The Transition Team is accountable to the Consistory.

### **3. Search Team**

They are the primary team to gather information from the consistory, congregation, staff, community, demographic studies, etc. After receiving the missional directive from the consistory, the Search Team then formulates both a church profile and a profile of the kind of person they feel would be best qualified to lead the church. These profiles are then shared with the Consistory for discussion and prayer. When both the Consistory and Search Team have “signed off” on the profiles, then a list of key people can be compiled who are known and respected across the RCA (and from other places) who might be able to recommend names of people who fit the profile. When names have been gathered, those who do not fit the profiles are eliminated from the list. Others are approached to pray and consider entering into a discernment process with the church.

*Team of 5-7 people. Members must be highly discerning, prayerful, and mature in Christ. These people represent the whole of the church...not any individuals or specific groups in the church. Both the classis-based regional strategist and the regional executive should be considered members of this team. This is for the purpose of networking best possible candidates. They may not be able to attend each meeting.*

The Search Team is accountable to the Consistory.

### **4. Senior Pastor**

In most cases, the Lead Pastor will be at the church following the public announcement of their leaving. There are ways to benefit from their presence and you want to take advantage of them. There are also some involvements that can make your process more challenging and you want to avoid them.

Your classis-based regional strategist and classis supervisor are there to help guide you in your particular situation.

The Pastor’s input can be very valuable as the Consistory considers people for the Transition Team and Search Team.

If the leaving Pastor intends to stay in the congregation, there needs to be a clearly established and agreed upon understanding of how that relationship will work.

The Senior Pastor is accountable to the Consistory.

## **5. Staff (*Paid and Unpaid*)**

When there are other staff members, they are to step up and provide verbal support for the process. They are to encourage people to be in prayer and to allow God to use the people He has set aside for this pastoral search. Staff should be included in special updates to the process so they are kept generally informed. However, certain information must be kept confidential and would be inappropriate to share with the staff prematurely. Help the staff to understand both of these realities as you go through the transition process.

## **6. Congregation**

Officially, a Congregation is made up of the members of the church. However, all those who call that Congregation their “home church” should be able to offer appropriate input as requested by the Consistory and Search Team.

They are the people of the church who should be regularly informed about the search process. Their prayers ought to include the Search Team, the Transition Team, the Consistory and the one who God has been preparing to lead them.

The congregation does not make the decision (the Consistory does). However, it should be determined early on by the Search Team when and what is appropriate to communicate to the Congregation.

The Congregation is accountable to the Consistory.

## **7. Classis *and* Region**

Our covenant community means that the vision/mission of a church will be in alignment with the Classis and Region.

An official Classis representative (Regional Strategist or Classis Supervisor) is to be notified and participate in the transition process before the pastor or elders announce the Pastor’s coming departure. The Classis-based regional Strategist and the Regional executive should be on the search committee for outside guidance, support and resources.

When a Consistory has discerned by the Holy Spirit the call of God for a new lead pastor, the Classis must also confirm their desire by approving the details of that call prior to its presentation to the Candidate. This is intended to provide another hedge of protection around a congregation, as members of Classis also apply Godly wisdom.

*The elders and pastors of area churches constitute classis.*

## 8. Candidate(s)

Candidates are those potential pastors being considered by the Search Team. There are five categories of Candidates:

1. **Long-List Candidates**—Names gathered from various sources, but candidates have not yet been contacted. The Search Team will eliminate those who do not meet the pastor profile criteria.
2. **Profile-List Candidates**—These are all those who seem to fit the general profile description and will be contacted by the Search Team. Potential candidates are asked to pray and seek with us about their willing to be considered.
3. **Short-List Candidates**—Those that agree to continue in the process with the Search Team to learn more and seek God’s wisdom.
4. **Assessed Candidates**—These are the few Candidates that are being personally interviewed, references contacted, messages listened to, leadership history examined, etc.
5. **Affirmed Candidate**—This is the one Candidate that is affirmed by the Search Team and is being presented to the Consistory for their consideration.

Search Team must have regular and systematic communication with the Short-List, Assessed and Affirmed Candidates. How and when the Search Team communicates with Candidates says a great deal about how church leadership functions.

## Part Two—The Guided Search Process

**The following is a general flow that demonstrates the various people and elements to be considered through the pastoral transition process.**

Classis Strategist or Classis Clerk is contacted and a Classis representative or Supervisor is present when the decision is communicated with the elders.

### Perspectives on an *Interim Pastor* versus a *Guided Pastoral Search*

A Guided Pastoral Search will consider the following:

1. **Intercessory Team**—Identify them and keep them appropriately informed
2. **Lay of the Land**—Books, demographics, psychographics, etc.
3. **Leadership Team**—Leadership Profiles (gifts, passions, priorities, etc.)
4. **Systemic Issues**—History, repeated patterns, corporate confessions, etc.
5. **Governing Structure**—Aligning responsibility with authority and accountability
6. **Staff Issues**—Turnover, teamwork, cooperation, etc.
7. **Pastoral Search**—Classis and Regional expectations for church health
  - Teachable*
  - Team Player*—church, classis, region, RCA
  - Missional*—expanding the Kingdom through the local church

Questions and Comments

### **Perspectives from Pastors who let go, watched and/or participated...**

Dave Schutt, Steve Brooks, Karl Overbeek, Steve Struikmans

### **Perspectives from those who were called...**

Greg Alderman, Eric Carpenter, Dwight Bailey, Scott Treadway

## **Overview: Pastoral Transition and Guided Search Process**

1. Pastoral Transition Initiated
2. Intercessory Team
3. Form Transition Team
4. Form Search Team
5. Lay-of-the-Land Study
6. Church Profile Completed
7. Pastor Profile Completed
8. Consistory Approval
9. Systemic Issues / Corporate Confession
10. Accountable Leadership Model Implemented
11. Long-List Candidates
12. Profile-List Candidates
13. Short-List Candidates
14. Assessed Candidates
15. Affirmed Candidate
16. Consistory Affirmation
17. Candidate Introduction to Congregation

### **Other Considerations:**

Pulpit Supply  
Finishing Strong  
General Timeline (6-8 months)  
Online Information  
Pain Plan