

# Should You Accept a Call to a Church in a Transitional Community?

As a pastor, should you accept a call to a church in a transitional community? Of course, if God sends you, you should go—you *must* go—but *how do you know* if that is what God is leading you to do?

**First, you have to be able to recognize a transitional community when you see one.** A transitional community is seeing significant changes in language, racial makeup, ethnically, or socio-economically. Generally, the congregation is aging and their community represents a poorer socio-economic group. Sometimes a wealthy new subdivision (perhaps with an upscale golf course) is built in a blue collar area; so it can go both ways. I am not saying that any of these groups is less desirable than another. I am saying the mixture of people groups in such a community is a dynamic you need to understand. Generally such changes are obvious, but sometimes the transition is in the early stages and more difficult to detect at a glance.

**If a church is seriously considering you as pastor, it is important to learn all you can about their congregational culture, their recent history and their community.** Get their Sunday School averages for the last decade. Study the demographic material on the community from the state office or online. Ride around the neighborhoods with your wife and look closely at the community. Get a sense of what it is like there. In the interviews, ask lots of questions about the community.

As you seek God's guidance as to whether you should go to a transitional church, here are some thoughts and questions to take to the Lord. Think these matters through before Him as you pray:

**What is this church looking for?** A pastor who will do all the same old things in the same old way, but with different results this time? A chaplain to love and care for them? Or do they want to reach their community? Really? Do they want to reach the few folks like them in the community, or do they want to reach the community as it now exists?

**Are they desperate?** Are they willing to pay any price and bear any burden to fulfill their mission? Or is their goal merely survival – "To keep the doors open"? One pastor has spent a career going to churches, seeing them come to life, and grow. All of his life, he has had a sense of call to serve, not transitional but, dead churches. His questions have been: Are they dead enough? Are they desperate enough? If they are not absolutely desperate they can't grow and he will not go.

**Are they telling you the truth?** All pulpit committees tell candidates they are looking for someone who can grow the church. They all say they want a strong leader. They tell you they are willing to change to reach the community. They aren't exactly lying; most of them are just a little short on congregational self-awareness. They aren't fully aware of the reality of their community situation and what it would take to reach them. And even if the pulpit committee really gets it and still says such things, do they represent the consensus of the congregation at large?

**Are you prepared to do all the pastoral care that will be required?** If you are a heavy-duty expositor who spends a lot of time in the study, or you are part-minister of education, or you are part-church growth strategist, or a pure-bred disciple-maker, you will spend so much time at the hospital and preparing for funerals, you may become frustrated.

**Have they gone toxic yet?** Churches in decline get to a point where they turn bitter and assign blame. This stage is near the end of the life cycle. The next stage is making peace with their mortality and acceptance of their impending death.

**Can this patient be saved?** If the church is on its death bed, let them call a retired pastor to tend their flock on a part-time basis. They want a “hospice chaplain” and that’s the only kind of pastor they will respond to.

**Are you gifted in transcultural ministry?** Serving a church in a transitioning community is part missions. It involves ministering to more than one sub-culture, ethnic, or socio-economic group. Can you flow between them and minister effectively to all? A pastor in this situation once stated he ministers to two groups: the folks in his church and the folks in his community and described it as two distinct ministries.

**What percentage of this congregation could be trained (or adapt) to do transcultural ministry?** If they are telling you they have ruled out relocation and want to stay to minister to the community, this is a key question.

**Are you patient enough for this assignment?** If you are young and a hard charger, you will feel like you are beating your head against a wall. This kind of church could give a strong leader a nervous break-down.

**Can you handle living in the shadow** of the great Reverend Dr. Jones and repeatedly hearing stories about the glory days?

**How will your children fare** in an environment composed of all grandparents and few peers? Will it be safe for them to play in the yard?

**How do you think you would do as a church planter?** There is a difference between a clothes closet and an indigenous congregation. Many churches in transitional communities have a food pantry or a clothes closet or something like that. They are doing ministry – and that is good. Jesus taught us to help people in such ways. But this kind of ministry will not reach a community like a new church *from* that people-group and *for* that people-group. That’s what is meant by an indigenous congregation. This is the most effective evangelistic tool known to man. Folks like us make a church like ours, and a church like ours can reach folks like us. Here’s a question to ask the search committee: “Would this congregation be willing to sponsor a new church to reach the Albanian community who live here, and allow them to share your facilities?”

Having said all this, **God may lead you to a transitional church.** You should go into such a situation with your eyes wide open, knowing what you are getting into. Such churches aren’t for sissies! It may be that God will put you there for a while—to train you, to humble you, to season you, and to show you how to “put some touch on the ball.” But you will need to go in with reasonable expectations and the right spirit. Most of all, you should have a clear and strong sense of calling to do what you will be doing there.

# The Pastor in the Transitional Church

What's life like for the pastor in a church in a transitioning community?

**It's hard work.** For one reason, there are so many seniors in the community, that the average household size is much lower. That means to just keep church attendance even, the church has to reach more households. In the heyday of the congregation there were all those families of four or five. There aren't as many of those families any more. This pastor may be working harder than any pastor in the church's history and have the least to show for it.

**It's a balancing act.** He is trying to reach and to minister to the people in the community, and the members of the church are a different kind of people. The pastor has to balance caring for his congregation with outreach to the community. He has to balance what he tries in the worship services with the traditions of the establishment. It's a balancing act to lead such a congregation forward... gently, not too fast.

**He experiences the immovable object up close and personal.** Here is a church that needs to make the most radical adjustments to save its very existence -- but most often this congregation is the least open to change. Of course, *nobody* likes change except babies with wet diapers. But this situation takes change-resistance to a whole new level.

**It's stressful.** He does more funerals and visits more gravely ill people than any other pastor. Pastors of much larger church may have as many people in the hospital, but they have staff members to help them. This pastor takes care of them all himself.

**He catches a lot of blame.** Many of the members who remember the glory years wonder why he can't do any better. Churches in decline go through a prolonged period of trying to decide what has happened to them and to discover who's responsible. Everything the pastor does is nit-picked. They often can't see what has happened to their neighborhood. So they blame the pastor... and his successor and the next successor. "Hey! Ain't none of these guys any good."

Then, in the final stages of the church's death, there is acceptance. Members desire only that the church hang on long enough to bury them.

**He is unknown in denominational life.** Go pastor a church where the community population doubles every five years and you can grow that church blindfolded. You will be asked to speak at seminars or preach at the state pastor's conference. Pastor a church in a changing community and it's different. Survival may a huge accomplishment. You may be doing more with less. You may exhibit tremendous creativity. But no one will want to know your secret. You will, however, get to hear the "big dog preachers" at the Pastor's Conference describe how your church will grow if you will just pray longer and witness more.

**It's hard to move to a new church.** Pulpit committees come in and see a worship center with a capacity of 500 with 100 people in attendance they wonder, "What's wrong with this pastor? He's run this place into the ground!" Worship in such an "undercrowded" room is an uphill climb -- with full pack. Until you acclimate to this dynamic, you survive these worship services, you don't find them uplifting. ...Next candidate.

## What Can You Do in a Transitional Church?

If the Lord has placed you in a church in a transitional community – which means of course, a church in transition – what can you do? Assuming relocation isn't an option:

The call to a transitional community is a call to a ministry that is part missions. *Missions is evangelism that crosses cultural and/or geographical boundaries.*

The most effective means of reaching people of a different culture is an indigenous congregation. That is, a congregation led by, and made up of, people like the folks you are trying to reach. It takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people.

- **You could sponsor a new congregation in your community at another location.** Let's not hear all the whiny excuses about being in too weak a financial situation to sponsor a new congregation. The state convention, the association, and other congregations will help. You already own the property and the buildings. Besides, all these years you have been sending missionary gifts all around the world. Why not DO some missions?
- **You could sponsor a new congregation and share your present facilities with them.** You would have different sets of leaders, different schedules, and different ways of doing church. You may hold joint services on a periodic basis. Both groups help with the cost of utilities and upkeep. It may be that eventually, the original group dies out, but they will have left a legacy to a congregation that shares their doctrine, their values, and their mission. Another church or business would have gotten their property anyway. This way, they get to choose who will receive their legacy.
- **You could go multi-site in a "Go AND Stay" approach.** One congregation at two locations. The seniors get to stay in their beloved building and the younger folks get to advance the future of the church at a new site. They meet together jointly once a week for a rally-like service. They share a unified budget. When there's no longer a new to maintain a facility in the old neighborhood, a new work is started in the old building.
- **You could go multi-site where the new location becomes a "life raft" for the entire congregation.** It gives the congregation time before the final move. Again, a new work is started in the old facility.
- **You could set the stage for a future relocation.** You purchase property and lay the groundwork. This will work if your congregation has enough young people and you are in the earlier stages of community transition. Warning: the danger is to wait until it is too late.