

EXPECTANT CONVERSATIONS: PREPARING FOR A GOOD FUTURE

We liked the way Milton Erickson attended to and respected the experience of the people he worked with. He cultivated a kind of relationship that . . . put a benevolent spotlight on people's particular situations. Erickson showed a lively and interested appreciation for people. He fully and palpably believed that there was something unique and wonderful about every human being. When he asked a question, he would await its answer with an air of delighted expectation -- with a twinkle in his eye, an encouraging grin, and great patience. You just knew that any person he asked was going to come up with a wonderful answer, something different from what anyone could have predicted.

--Narrative Therapy, p.10

*Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus, Born to set they people free;
From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's strength and consolation, Hope of all the world Thou art.
Dear Desire of every nation; Joy of every longing heart.*

The word expectation comes from the Latin word *expectationem*, meaning "an awaiting."

The definition of expectation builds upon these meanings: belief about (or mental picture of) the future, the feeling that something is about to happen, anticipating with confidence of fulfillment.

In the life of the church, the season tied with expectation is Advent. Advent is the time when we wait with anticipation for the coming of the Christ Child, as if we had never waited before. And Advent is the season when we wait with repentance for the Second Coming, when Jesus will come again and the waiting for the New Creation will be over.

When we are expecting, we are filled with eagerness for the new thing that is coming. Parents expect babies. High school students expect graduation. Waiting congregations expect pastors.

Expecting. Expectancy. Expectation. They are rich words. The new thing about to happen is expected to be a joyful one.

So isn't it ironic that frequently when pastors and congregations start to bring up the word "expectation," it so often is the expression of grievance? In the presbytery office we get the call "Pastor Slacker isn't filling our expectations for visitation." (Or preaching. Or administration. Or sensitivity.) On the other phone line might be the pastor, complaining about the impossible demands of the congregation.

Pastors who are selected as the result of a thorough search process often start with the vast good will of a congregation. This is sometimes called the "honeymoon" period, which is unfortunate, because the temptation to declare the honeymoon over arises the first time people bump into each other and get "nudgy" or crosswise as a result.

Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had sprung from a wish dream. The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. But God's grace speedily shatters such dreams. . . just as surely we must be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves. . . We enter into common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients. We thank God for what God has done for us. God has given brothers [and sisters] who will go on living with us through sin and need because of grace.

Even when sin and misunderstanding burden the communal life, is not the sinning brother [or sister] still a brother [or sister], with whom I, too, stand under the Word of Christ? Will not his sin be a constant occasion for me to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ? Thus the very hour of disillusionment with my brother [or sister] becomes incomparably salutary, because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and Deed which really binds us together by forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.

-- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together

What the start-up period *does* bring is the vast advantage that nothing has yet solidified into a pattern. It is a time for change, experimenting, and learning to dance together. This is an excellent time to enter into Expectant Conversations about what would help the pastor and congregation to thrive together. The results of the Expectant Conversations then can become part of the Key Objectives and Action Steps in the Coaching/Equipping Process.

Making the space for robust Expectant Conversations at pastoral start-up is an excellent idea. Many times congregations and pastors rely upon the genuine good-will of all involved and simply “live into” their life together. What can happen then is that when the pastor and the congregation bump into unspoken assumptions and people start to feel disappointed. If they do not stop to talk about the disappointment directly with each other – and if people start to voice their disappointment in a swirl of upset -- then the initial hope can feel derailed.

In the Presbytery of Donegal we believe that God is acting all of the time to create possibilities for reconciliation and new beginnings. The Bible is a narrative of conflicts, and the amazing ways that God acts within them to bring good. We believe that most conflicts in congregations can be part of the plot of that congregation's development into a more resilient, healthier community. We believe that most pastors and congregations can make their way through even a giant mess of a conflict, and come out the other side stronger and with delight at entering a good future.

In Gamer Theory, these God-generated opportunities to try again are called “re-plays,” meaning that it is possible to go back to a save point, and replay the conflict. Even if a group has died in a Boss Battle several times, it is possible to go at it differently, not die in the Boss Battle, and level up together.

For non-gamers what that means is even when a congregation is entrenched in conflict, it is possible to walk it back from the cliff, take a breath and calm down, and to have Expectant Conversations. We believe the Holy Spirit is persistently present to weave resiliency and to help things to get better. It is never too late to start to talk with each other. Sometimes the best Expectant Conversations are held several years into a pastorate, when the wish-dreams have been shattered by the grace of God.

While there are many types of Expectant Conversations, some that are helpful are:

- ✚ Sharing the History of the Congregation with the Pastor and each other
- ✚ Sharing Faith Journey Stories
- ✚ Sharing Traditions involving seasonal events and worship customs
- ✚ Work Load and Time Expectations for the Pastor and Church Leaders
- ✚ Best Practices for Visitation
- ✚ Creating a Covenant for How We Treat Each Other

The Executive Presbyter and Stated Clerk, along with Connecting our Ministry Commission members, are available to assist in designing or to lead any of these Expectant Conversations.

EXPECTANT CONVERSATIONS: SHARING THE HISTORY OF THE CONGREGATION

When a new pastor comes to join a congregation, they are coming to join a church family with stories and traditions that go back for years, decades, and maybe centuries. Many times some members of congregations may be hoping for a pastor who will be like the pastors they regard as their signature pastor, who led the golden era of the church. This hope may be voiced. Oftentimes, this hope may be unspoken. People with hopes like these may not even realize how much these hopes affect what they want from this new pastor. On the other end of the spectrum, congregations may harbor stories of negative experiences with a pastor, and may be reactive if a pastor does something that reminds them of the pastor they did not like.

Pastors likewise come to a new pastorate bringing all the history of the pastors they have known in congregations where they have been members, and they bring their experiences for good or ill in other congregations where they have been “the pastor.”

Members of congregations and pastors also come into the pastorate with cultural images of what makes a stellar pastor, even if a real pastor could never measure up. There’s a famous pop culture email that circulates called “the perfect pastor.” It is included at the end of this document because more than we want to admit, these cultural ideals -- including age and gender – shape the unconscious assumptions we bring about what congregations “want” in their pastor.

All of these experiences and assumptions can be a rich bouillabaisse to savor. Or they can make up the ingredients for a toxic stew. What to do with all these stories? Tell them. Tell them early. Tell them deeply. And listen at the same depth.

STORYTELLING THE HISTORY OF THE CONGREGATION

This is based upon an activity developed by Roy Oswald for the Alban Institute. The Executive Presbyter and Stated Clerk are trained in this exercise, and are glad to lead this experience as part of pastoral start-up activities.

Get a large roll of newsprint. On it draw a timeline. Place major cultural events at the top. Place markers for pastors. Add signature congregational events.

Set a time for the community to tell the story to the pastor. If the group is smaller, engage in collaborative storytelling. If it is a larger group, invite people to submit their memories ahead of time and collect them into groupings by pastor or significant event. If there are many stories to tell, plan for ways to keep telling the stories after the initial event.

Once a body of stories has been told, pay attention to which ones and how many are problem-saturated narratives of troubles? Which stories and how many sparkle as stories of good times in the congregation? What sparkle stories are currently operative in the life of the congregation? What problem-saturated stories persist in the present?

Invite those present to imagine being the pastor and listening to the stories.

Invite them to write a note to the pastor advising on what to learn from the timeline.

Conclude with a worship/prayer experience releasing the past and entering into a new part of the story.

Expectant Conversations: Sharing Faith Histories as Church Leaders

People who lead in churches – pastors, educators, youth leaders, ruling elders, deacons, trustees, other leaders – all have a story about how God has entered their lives, and brought them to this time and place of service. Sharing these stories of faith journeys is a way to deepen relationships and build understanding about core values and experiences.

The best way to share Faith Journeys is on a leadership retreat, or by devoting a few meetings to nothing but this sharing. To share a Faith Journey with some depth will take at least 15 minutes. Going deeper could take longer! If time and space cannot be worked out, then a few people can share at each meeting – this takes longer, and momentum is hard to sustain. But any sharing is better than no sharing.

Although sharing can be simply verbal, a better way is for people to draw their faith journeys on paper, using crayons or colored markers. People draw the plot/timeline of their lives, with significant life occurrences symbolized or written where they happened on the timeline. Some people are artists and create art. Other people are doing well to draw stick figures. What matters is putting it down. Since God is involved in all moments of our lives, this is a faith journey – but many people also draw the moments that are significant spiritually and include milestones such as confirmation or being elected as a deacon.

EXPECTANT CONVERSATIONS: SHARING TRADITIONS

The word root of “tradition” means to “give across” – and the root also has in it “deliver” and “betray.” Our lives are shaped by traditions, many of them that are “given across” from generation to generation. Sometimes new traditions start – having people in for soup to use up leftovers suddenly becomes the annual day after Thanksgiving gathering. Buying a silly magnet on vacation one summer fills the refrigerator door with magnets from every place the family travels.

Likewise in congregations traditions shape the life of the community and set the rhythms of congregational life. The banners made one year at an Advent workshop now have been hung for 21 years running. Nobody remembers when the strawberry festival first started, but everyone knows it is the first weekend in June. It’s the youth group that lights the candles while the congregation sings “Silent Night.” Communion is always in the pews, except for Maundy Thursday, when it is by intinction. Everybody sits down to listen to the postlude.

Traditions are a chief source of the meaning and happiness in the life of a congregation. And the new pastor comes in as an outsider, not knowing any of them. Many times a pastor doesn’t know about a significant tradition until there is a headlong crash by changing something that she or he doesn’t know is a change.

Pastors come with traditions that are significant to them for their lives in previous congregations, and often expect that their great tradition will be immediately embraced with the same passion in their new congregation. When unspoken values about traditions collide, it can cause things to get messy.

Conversations about Traditions

One the wall are posted 20 large pieces of Newsprint. 12 of the newsprint pages are labeled by the Month of the year. The others are labelled Christmas, Easter, Other Holidays, Worship, Meetings, Stewardship and Money, The Pastor Always ..., and Other Traditions.

Each small group gets post-it notes in 3 different colors. Working together, the groups use a post-it note for each tradition they can identify for each of the 19 areas. Use one color post-it for “traditions we love.” Use one color post-it for “this is a tradition, but there is some tension about it.” Use one color post-it for “this is a tradition we’d like to start.” Each group is provided with a worship bulletin to jog the memory on significant traditions related to the service of worship.

The pastor gets a different color of post-it, and contributes her or his significant traditions in each area.

After all the post-its have been placed, the convener invites people to circulate through the room, looking at what has been posted. The convener then leads a discussion on what people notice. Part of the discussion can include advice to the pastor on “don’t mess with this.” Another part of the discussion can include people reflecting back to the pastor at least 3 of the pastor’s traditions they would be willing to try. These lists are great to type up and come back to periodically to see what has stayed the same and what is shifting.

EXPECTANT CONVERSATIONS: WORK HOURS AND PARAMETERS

A chief area where good conversations lead to happy pastorates and lack of conversations lead to brief pastorates is in the area of work hours and the parameters of the pastor's responsibilities as the pastor. An unspoken assumption carried by many of us is that "our pastor" is always on duty and always available. Many pastors carry this inside assumption inside themselves as well, believing they need to encompass at all times everything that is part of the pastoral workload.

Healthy conversations in this area involve being clear about what the pastor is expected to do, and how many hours per week (in a normal week) the pastor is expected to work. The other side of this healthy conversation is what the leaders of congregation expect themselves to do, and how many hours they expect to serve in their leadership capacities.

The Presbytery of Donegal identifies as normative a work week for pastors of 40-45 hours per week, plus 5 hours for prayer and reflection. If a pastor is routinely working more than 50 hours per week, then our advice is that work load needs to be shared, or some things need to go undone. Study after study shows that productivity goes down and burnout rises when pastoral work weeks are more hours than this norm.

In a 2013 blog post Tom Rainier wrote:

I want to ask the question: How many hours must a pastor work each week to satisfy the congregation? When I was a pastor in St. Petersburg, Florida, I gave a survey to the twelve deacons in the church. I listed several congregational responsibilities and asked them to share the minimum amount of time I should average in each area each week. I listed about twenty areas; but they were free to add other responsibilities to the blank lines.

I'm not sure exactly what I was anticipating. I just know that I was shocked when I tallied the results. In order to meet those twelve deacons' minimum expectations I had to fulfill the following responsibilities each week:

Prayer at the church: 14 hours

Sermon preparation: 18 hours

Outreach and evangelism: 10 hours

Counseling: 10 hours

Hospital and home visits: 15 hours

Administrative functions: 18 hours

Community involvement: 5 hours

Denominational involvement: 5 hours

Church meetings: 5 hours

Worship services/preaching: 4 hours

Other: 10 hours

Total: 114 hours/week

If I met just the minimum expectations of twelve deacons, I would have to work more than 16 hours a day for seven days a week. Or I could take one day off of work each week, and work 19 hours a day for six days a week. And remember, I still would only meet the minimum expectations of twelve people in the church, not the entire membership.

<http://thomrainer.com/2013/07/24/how-many-hours-must-a-pastor-work-to-satisfy-the-congregation/>

The Presbytery of Donegal has developed a worksheet on how to divide up a pastor's time for a normal week. This recognizes that some church seasons are busier than others. And some weeks will have pastoral care crises that said aside normal duties and time frames. This worksheet is required for all part-time positions, and is recommended for conversation for all pastoral positions.

A helpful way to have this conversation is to invite the session to fill out the worksheet individually, and then to compile the results. For a typical session, there will be a wide range, which is how pastors end up working 60-70 hour weeks, in order to try to meet all the competing expectations.

The pastor independently fills out the same worksheet.

The next step is to talk about it as a session, and see what emerges in that conversation.

The step after that is for the people who will have responsibility for monitoring pastoral work hours (the pastor and the Coaching-Equipping Team or the Personnel Committee) to take the data and come up with a job/time description that fits within the 50 hour work week. When there is a refined model, it then goes back to the session for more conversation and adoption.

The next part of this exercise is to talk about the other expectations about the pastor's life as the pastor of the church and the pastor's life as an individual with a personal life, and perhaps a family. Some of these questions are:

- ☒ What days off/time off will the pastor be taking?
- ☒ What about phone calls/text messages not during work hours?
- ☒ What about email? When does it get answered?
- ☒ What if there is an emergency when the pastor is on vacation or study leave?
- ☒ When are church members welcome to drop by the manse/pastoral house?
- ☒ Are office hours drop in, or by appointment?
- ☒ How will the pastor's family be involved in the life of the church?

Another part of this conversation involves the leaders of the church. Each leader develops their job description for what they do in service to Jesus Christ through their service at the church. How many hours per week/month does this involve? Compile this data to see the number of hours per week/month that the leaders together are spending.

Some areas where leaders might emerge are in visitation—are there visitation teams, or is the pastor solely responsible? What groups need pastoral involvement, and what groups are bringing forth the leadership of other leaders? These are excellent conversations to have routinely as leaders.

THE PERFECT PASTOR "JOKE"

The Perfect Pastor preaches exactly 10 minutes. They condemn sin roundly, but never hurt anyone's feelings. They work from 8 a.m. until midnight and also work as the church janitor.

The Perfect Pastor makes \$40 a week, wears good clothes, drives a good car, buys good books, and donates \$30 a week to the church. They are 29 years old with 40 years' worth of experience. Above all, they are are photogenic.

The Perfect Pastor has a burning desire to work with teenagers and spend most of their time with the senior citizens. They smile all the time with a straight face because of their sense of humor that keeps them seriously dedicated to the church. They make 15 home visits a day and are always in their office to be handy when needed.

The Perfect Pastor always has time for church meetings and all of its committees, never missing the meeting of any church organization. And they are always busy evangelizing the unchurched.

The Perfect Pastor is always in the next town over!

If your pastor does not measure up, simply send this notice to six other churches that are tired of their pastor too. Then bundle up your pastor and send to the church at the top of your list. If everyone cooperates, in one week you will receive 1, 643 pastors. One of them should be perfect.

Have faith in this letter. One church broke the chain and got its old pastor back in less than three months.

-- Internet meme, with no identifiable author. Generally labelled as "this is funny, until it isn't."