

Transition - A Pastor's Life

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Seems like change is a timeless topic. Thousands of books on Managing Change have been published in the past three decades. However, not as many books have been published on how change affects our lives or, on how to understand the psychological implications of change.

There is an interesting book on “Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change,” by William Bridges. I believe this is a good read for anyone going through any kind of change. The author explains that change is situational and different from transition, which he describes as a “reorientation process.” People go through such a process when they are coming to terms with change. I will share some of my thoughts and experience with transitions later in this writing.

Coincidentally, during the week of September 22, The National Federation of Priests' Councils (NFPC) referenced an essay by Fr. David Songy, OFM Cap, a clinical psychologist and the president of Saint Luke Institute. His essay was published earlier this year on the *Our Sunday Visitor* website. Fr. David shares insightful views on the three-phase psychological process of Transition revealed in Bridges' book.

Though I will not get into the three-phase process of transition in detail, allow me to share my understanding of it through personal experience. I intend to tell you about my experiences with the different phases of transition in a two-part article. I am almost certain you will or have come across similar situations in your priesthood so, I hope that my story will provide you with some orientation to manage your own transitions. I think it is important for veteran pastors to find ways to share their experience with younger priests and particularly with newly appointed pastors.

I recently celebrated the 32nd Anniversary of my priesthood so reminiscing past experiences is unavoidable. Throughout my life as a priest I have lived through quite a few changes. I have served as the pastor of three very different parish communities. Each of these experiences has presented me with challenges and opportunities. In each case, there was a period of transition for me, for the parish staff, and for the community.

I have been asked many times why I became a priest, my answer is not what most people expect to hear. Yes, I was born and raised Catholic and attended Catholic School. My first thought about becoming a priest was when I was in third grade. However, it was not until later in my life –in my 30's that I acted on it. God had been with me always so, I decided to follow God and live my childhood dream.

Becoming a priest –the start of a never-ending transition

Bridges explained in his book that all transitions start with an “Ending”. I believe that becoming a priest is a perfect example of the ending phase referenced in Making the Most of Change. I had completed my Theology studies at CTU and was presented with the opportunity to become a priest in the Diocese of Lansing, Michigan. This is where I was ordained in 1985. As much as I was eager to begin my priesthood, I had no idea how moving to an unfamiliar place, away from

family and friends would affect me on top of the process of letting go of my old life and figuring out how to be a priest.

I realized many years later that though I had managed to serve the Diocese of Lansing as an associate pastor for five years; I had not actually processed the transition brought on by this significant change in my life. I served the Church in Lansing and would travel back and forth to Chicago as often as I could. In my mind I had never moved from Chicago, it was just a very long commute. Though I had let go of my life as a lay person, I missed my family, my friends and the city where I had lived all my life. Five years later, I was fortunate to have been granted permission to move back to Chicago.

From associate to pastor

Upon my return to Chicagoland, I served the Diocese of Joliet for a couple of years as an associate pastor before being appointed pastor to my first parish. A small tight knit faith community of about 200 families who were grieving the sudden death of their beloved founding pastor. They did not have a Church building or worship space. Sunday Mass had been held in the gymnasium of a nearby school for the past ten years.

The bishop of Joliet who appointed me tasked with three goals: 1.) Align the parish with the diocese. 2.) Raise the number of parishioners and 3.) Build a worship space for this parish in three years' time. This was without a doubt a challenge and the start of a new transition not only for me, but also for everyone involved.

Though the members of the community had bid farewell to their former pastor they now needed to bid farewell to the way things used to be done. Only then, could we move forward together to renew our parish. There was clearly an ending that we all had to process.

For me, it was the ending of my time as an associate pastor. I had to process this change quickly and assume my new role as the pastor of this community so I could help both staff and parishioners during their transition. It took a while but once we came together, we learned how to be a new faith community creating a new reality—this is what Bridges describes as the “Neutral Zone.”

The community grew to 500 families. The worship space was built by my third year there and on my fourth year, the bishop called me to start a new parish. So, my experience with a New Beginning was still to come and I will tell you all about that next time.

I believe that assuming the responsibilities that come with a parish—leading God's people as their pastor, connecting with parishioners in a profound and significant way from a sacramental viewpoint, and helping people build and strengthen their relationship with God is a pastor's job description. However, in my experience seminaries prepare men for priesthood but it takes years of hands-on training to become a pastor.

If you agree that experienced priests can play an important role in nurturing and empowering new pastors to succeed, look for Part -2 of this article coming soon. Also, if you are a new pastor

who would like a friendly ear please feel free to contact me. Email:
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Father Dennis Lewandowski is a priest of the Diocese of Joliet, IL. Currently the pastor of a large corporate parish in Naperville, IL, he is known for facilitating a positive working environment and empowering others to grow. He has a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from Lewis University; a Master's in Divinity from Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, and a Masters in Organizational Development from Loyola University Chicago.