

Grief and Transitions

By Joel Fitzgerald, Sr. Director of Church Relations.

Clergy and churches know change. The regular change of appointed pastor is built into our DNA as United Methodists. The process of itinerancy means that, for better and worse, we are used to change. Pastors come and pastors go. It's just who we are.

But for all that regular change is built into our system, do we actually change well? The business writer William Bridges, in *Managing Transitions*, makes a distinction between change as an event and transition as the emotional process around the event. Changes happen once and are done. Transitions are all the emotions that arise before, during, and after a change. A change may have happened years ago, and we might still be wrestling with the transition. Bridges argues that for organizations to handle change well, we have to attend to the reality of the emotions around transitions.

As a preacher's kid and then pastor in the UMC, I've known lots of change. I've gotten good at packing boxes, at making sure everything is ready when the mover arrives, of creating lists upon lists upon lists of what goes where and when. So, I'm really good at change. However, if I'm honest, I haven't always been great at managing transitions. Change is concrete. It happens. The moving van comes, and the stuff gets loaded. Transitions are hard. They involve messy emotions. Sometimes those emotions don't feel good. It's often easier to focus on the concrete, on finding that darn hammer we need to hang the picture than to wrestle with the grief, anxiety, and maybe even giddiness of a transition.

So how might we manage these transitions well? Here are some ideas:

1. *Name the emotions.* We will feel emotions. That is ok. Being aware of our emotions can help us deal with them in a healthy way.
2. *Don't discount instability.* In Bridges model, there is a middle phase in the transition process called the Neutral Zone. It is full of anxiety but also potential. Because it can be uncomfortable, our human instinct is to rush through it, to find stability at all

costs. But sometimes its in the unstable times that we find where we really need to go.

3. *Know that God's grace is with us.* What I love about our Wesleyan heritage is the understanding that God's grace is there no matter what. Even when we feel unsettled, even in the midst of transition, God's grace is an offer.

Needing to navigate transitions in your church or ministry? The United Methodist Foundation of Michigan can help. We offer coaching, consultations, and cohorts that can help you navigate the transitions inherent in ministry.

Books I'm Reading: *Gone for Good: Negotiating the Coming Wave of Church Property Transition* edited by Mark Elsdon. As the subtitle suggests, dealing with church property will be one of the adaptive challenges for churches and leaders in the next decades. Elsdon compiles essays with practical and theological resources for navigating the transitions around church property. If you are responsible for a church property, this resource is helpful for making missional decisions that go beyond just dollars and cents.