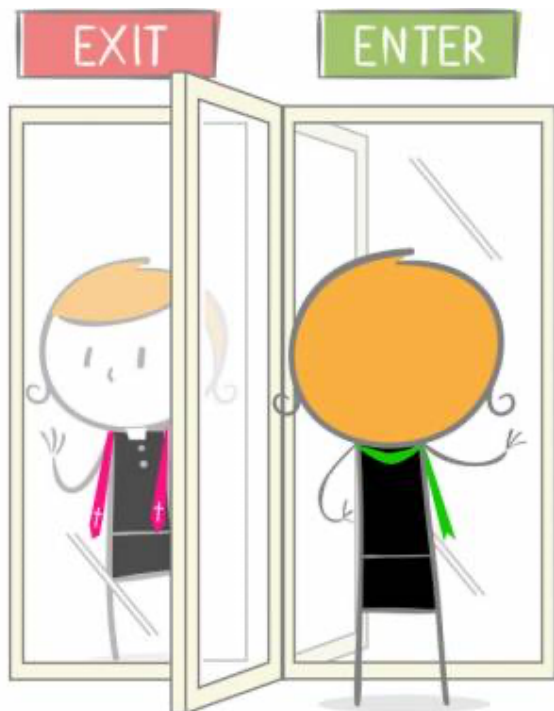


The ‘Great Realignment’: Pastors come and go

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I say hello, you say goodbye

by Mike Givler and Donna Frischknecht Jackson |
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Mark Thomson

In a rural corner of Indiana, the Rev. Laurel Hamilton thought she had found a long-term home at a church surrounded by farmland. Then the Covid pandemic happened. And, as Hamilton observed, it “either made a good pastoral relationship better or a weaker pastoral relationship worse.”

For the pastor who had years of what she described as “solid” ministry, toxic behaviors rose to the surface as the congregation wrestled with issues from acknowledging the collective trauma from two years of lives being uprooted to the question of wearing masks, which proved to be contentious.

“They wondered why they had to wear a mask in church when they didn’t have to wear one at the grocery store,” Hamilton said, adding that each issue she tried to address was met with pushback.

At the height of the pandemic, an anonymous congregational questionnaire reviewing the pastor discovered that many blamed Hamilton for the drop in attendance and giving. This was also the basis for the church to deny Hamilton a raise, one that would have brought her up only to the presbytery minimum.

It wasn’t until Hamilton researched the pandemic’s effects on church statistics and presented articles to the session that she was no longer blamed for the decrease in numbers. It was too late, though. Hamilton already decided to pursue another call.

In June, as this story went to press, she was accepting a call to serve in another church in her presbytery.

“If it had not been for Covid, I truly believe this would not have come to the point that it had, that I felt that I had to leave because of my emotional health,” said Hamilton.

Realigning, not resigning

Hamilton’s experience — and move to a new call — is not an isolated case within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The media has been buzzing about the “Great Resignation” — denoting the growing number of employees leaving their jobs as they emerge from the pandemic. But some economists say “resignation” isn’t indicative of what’s happening. Rather, there is a “Great Realignment” taking place.

In an April 2022 Barron’s report, Marcus Buckingham and Nela Richardson of the ADP Research Institute wrote the real trend is that of “realignment” as workers experience “subtle and complex shifts in how they see their jobs and themselves.”

For pastors, these shifts are accelerating. Some are reassessing their gifts as the world comes out of a global pandemic that had more effect on church life than anyone could have ever imagined. Others are simply looking for some new scenery. And still more, like Hamilton, are wanting to put behind them strained relationships that occurred during Covid.

As the Great Realignment shifts the clergy landscape, congregations find themselves navigating transitions that can be a time of joy, if done correctly, or a time of great tension. Either way, there is no denying the complexities — and the opportunities — that come with change.

A parade of thanks

The Rev. Laura Fitzgibbon has seen the good and the bad of pastoral transitions in her time as an interim in the Dallas area. In the summer of 2020, during the pandemic, she left one call and entered another in less than three months. What could have been a messy send-off and an awkward welcome ended up being wonderful experiences for Fitzgibbon because of the effort put forth by both congregations.

Grace Presbyterian Church in Plano, Texas, expressed thanks for the Rev. Laura Fitzgibbon’s time with them.



Courtesy of Laura Fitzgibbon

Her first move came when she left [Grace Presbyterian Church](#) in Plano, Texas, when a new pastor was being called. “It was difficult leaving during the pandemic because people were unsure of what was happening. What would church look like?” Fitzgibbon said. “There was a whole lot of pastoral care, but it was a different brand of pastoral care for pandemic times because it had to be done online.”

When it was time to move on, the church organized a drive-by parade and farewell party for Fitzgibbon, allowing the worshipers to express their thanks for her two-year ministry with them, while still maintaining a safe distance due to Covid protocols.

“People lined up around the block and drove past to hand me a gift or to say farewell. It was beautiful and touching, but hard because it was just so weird and different,” she said, adding that the restrictions, though, created more intentionality in saying goodbye in an affirming, thoughtful way.

The next phase for Fitzgibbon was an interim position two months later at nearby [The Nor’kirk Presbyterian](#) in Carrollton, Texas. It created another unique situation for her, as she was now starting a new call amid the pandemic. “It was a little more awkward because how do you get to know people when everybody has masks on, you’re outside and there’s this all spreading apart?” she recalled.

Nor’kirk Presbyterian is a family-oriented church and smaller than most of the churches Fitzgibbon has served. The congregation, she said, did everything “in their power” to help her get to know them.

What could have been two uncomfortable transitions in the span of a few short months ended up being a wonderful experience for Fitzgibbon. “Doing this during pandemic times showed that both of the churches saying goodbye and saying hello put more thought — because they had to — into how this was going to happen,” Fitzgibbon said. “Hopefully we learn from this and keep that intentionality going, and don’t just jump back into the ruts of doing it the way we did it before.”

Realigning one’s dream

For the Rev. Colleen Earp, the Great Realignment has meant her dream job is now a reality. The pastor had always had her eye on coming to [Massanetta Springs Camp and Conference Center](#) in



Courtesy of Colleen Earp

Harrisonburg, Virginia, but the timing wasn’t right. “The last time the Massanetta job opened, I thought, ‘Someday,’” Earp said. “That was on my short list of dream jobs. It has an incredible ministry, and it really would be a gift to serve.”

Staff and board members from Massanetta Springs Camp and Conference Center and Camp Hanover celebrate the ordination of the Rev. Colleen Earp. She is now serving in her dream job at Massanetta as program director.

That changed in September 2021, when she was hired as the program director after spending

seven years at [Camp Hanover](#) near Richmond, where she was the associate director of outdoor ministry focusing on environmental programming.

With the [Presbytery of the James](#) doing some restructuring, Earp transitioned to what she thought would be a temporary move: from Camp Hanover to a chaplain residency at the University of Virginia Hospital. The yearlong commitment fit perfectly with the timeline Massanetta had to hire its new program director. While some might have seen plans put on hold during the pandemic as a negative, this time of waiting made for a seamless transition for Earp and both camps.

“What made this transition so good was that I had a strong community to discern with on either end. I had time — a whole year to discern where I was being called. And I had a lot of support in asking questions,” said Earp.

The backing Earp received from Camp Hanover as she began to consider a new call was not surprising to her because of the staff and the relationships she had built, but it wasn’t lost on her either, as she was especially grateful for their support and understanding as she entered a new and different type of call.

Despite the good fit at Massanetta, any great realignment comes with some “new job” stress. That’s where Earp had to rely on her instincts — and faith in God’s leading.

“I really had to trust the mystery and the chaos that surrounded this transition, that something beautiful was going to be created out of it,” she said. “It was a very spiritual experience to navigate that and to know that God was with me. It really did feel Spirit-led because this was not the timing I would have picked for myself.”

A peaceful transition

The Rev. Emily Brewer has been the executive director for [Presbyterian Peace Fellowship](#) (PPF) for the past seven years. In that time, she has seen the organization rise to meet the needs of everything from gun violence prevention to the current war in Ukraine. It’s been a very fulfilling first call for her, and she is doing her part to make sure the incoming interim executive director, the Rev. Dr. David Ensign, has the same experience.

To help make the transition smooth, Brewer gave a four-month resignation in January, allowing for time for Ensign to shadow her at PPF, where he has been involved since 2006 as a volunteer and in other capacities. Still, Brewer knows that transitions, no matter how well planned they might be, can be messy.

“We’re going to try to anticipate the messes and acknowledge the messes. It’s not all going to go smoothly, but we’re going to do what we can and communicate about things as clearly as we can during all of this,” she said.

By having a new leader learning from the former head of the organization, it not only makes for an easier and smoother transition but also allows for the new person to hit the ground running as

he begins his tenure in staff leadership. “This really has been a commitment to continuity and transparency,” Ensign said.

Brewer admits that the pandemic has played a small role in her weariness and desire to leave PPF. It’s a transition Ensign feels just makes the organization fall in line with many Presbyterian congregations around the country.

“Transitional leadership within the Presbyterian Church is itself in a lot of transition,” he said. “Covid has shined a light on that, maybe even accelerated it.”

The art of a warm welcome

As the Rev. Lisa Salita began looking for a new call, [Georgetown Presbyterian Church](#) in Delaware quickly jumped off the page because of the love and support it has for its community. That energy was immediately felt by Salita and her husband when they decided to accept the invitation and move from Virginia, the only state they ever knew, to be closer to their new grandchild.

On the Sunday Salita did her trial sermon, she was surprised by a “Welcome Pastor Lisa” banner that was unfurled immediately after she was voted in by the congregation. A preplanned picnic followed the next day.

The manse at Georgetown was also refurbished and updated with new appliances. In fact, individuals from the church “sponsored” different rooms in the manse that they renovated mostly by themselves as part of their welcoming gesture. “It was an act of faith,” Salita said. “After worship one Sunday, they had a service of dedication, and they did a room-by-room blessing of the manse — before I was hired. This wasn’t about me; it was about the person they felt God was calling.”

The outpouring of support for Salita and her husband has greatly helped in this transition to a new call. It’s also helped form a ministry path for Salita going forward.

Georgetown Presbyterian has started a conversational Spanish class at the church, with the hope of one day growing a Spanish-language PC(USA) congregation in town.

“We’re trying to frame our vision together with the same notion of welcome and hospitality that has been their tradition and that they have shown me,” she said.

Remember the children

Change is inevitable these days and as clergy play the game of musical pulpits, one pastor wonders, “What do the children think?”

In times of her own pastoral transitions, the Rev. Dr. Karen Claassen has always made sure to include the children in welcoming and the sending off.

“Kids have rarely seen a pastor go before, so clear communication and a strong visual is important for them to connect with what is going on,” said Claassen.

This past Easter was Claassen's last day as co-pastor at [First Presbyterian Church](#) in Downey, California. During the service's children's time, she gathered the little ones and talked to them about good behavior, bringing up the clergy boundary contract that an exiting pastor signs, promising to act respectfully to the incoming pastor and their former congregation. She then had the children welcome the incoming pastor, the Rev. Nelson Grande, who was in attendance, and led them all in prayer.

"We have been talking about praying for one another, and I had introduced them to laying on of hands," she said.

Other ways she has included children in pastoral transitions is using illustrations with children of how a seed falls and dies so that something new can grow.

"The only pastor they remember is leaving. How will they bond with the new pastor if the last one just disappears or the new one isn't eased in?" she asks.

It's a question being asked more and more in this time of the Great Realignment, and one not just for children but for adults as well, as healthy ministries begin with healthy hellos and goodbyes.

Mike Givler is the communications coordinator for the [Synod of the Trinity](#). He lives in East Petersburg, Pennsylvania.

Donna Frischknecht Jackson is the editor of [Presbyterians Today](#) and works remotely in rural Vermont.

Navigating the Great Realignment

1. Congregational Covid conflicts have led to many pastors leaving their calls for new ones. Now is the time for more grace, love and understanding.
2. Recognize that there is a collective trauma of having lived more than two years with pandemic protocols and unresolved grief.
3. Acknowledge losses. Also acknowledge that tempers are short, emotions are high and hearts are hurting.
4. When saying goodbye to a pastor, don't let the pain of losing them lead to hurtful words or actions. Honor the time together.
5. Be intentional in extending a warm welcome to a new pastor and their family. Use this warm welcome to reflect on how to extend that out into the community.
6. This is a time when pastors are reassessing their priorities and their passions. Check in with your pastor to see how their call has shifted or changed. Perhaps a change in a pastor's job description is all that is needed to keep them in their current call.
7. Pastoral transitions can be the perfect time for congregations, too, to reassess who they are and to realign their identity with the needs of a community.

— *Donna Frischknecht Jackson*