

Planning for Leaving College

David Thurston and Andrew Woodyatt

1 Purpose of this document

This document is designed to help student ministers to work through the process of transition, and to assist them in planning for this time of significant change, so that they can begin ministry well.

Leaving college to go into ministry can be and often is a time of high anxiety. It's a time when there are not only lots of unknowns that you know you have yet to discover, but also unknowns you don't yet know. Stress doesn't help us trust in the Lord or help us process the transition from one significant community to another and this is especially so when we have a family.

These papers are not intended to give you answers. They are designed to name the 'elephants in the room', to identify that stress is a reality and to think about where that stress emanates from so you can at least be prepared for it; they are aimed at helping you make good decisions about saying good bye to one context and preparing you to make a good start in the new one.

Our hope is that your first year or so in ministry will be better for having thought through how to leave college and move into parish well.

2 What is coming up?

'Be prepared' is the motto for the Boy Scouts. That's our motto as well. While there are lots of things you can't anticipate in life, there are things that you can when you're leaving college and going to take up a ministry role somewhere.

Take some time and just work through the event stress calculator.¹

This is not an attempt to scare you but to prepare you so you can make some good decisions over the next 8-10 months.

¹ This survey probably came from Roy M. Oswald, "Clergy Burnout: A Survival Kit for Church Professionals".

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/unported/).

See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.en_GB for more details.

Event	Average value	Your score
The death of a spouse	100	
Divorce	73	
Marital separation	65	
Death of a close family member	63	
Personal injury or illness	53	
Marriage	50	
Geographical relocation	49	
Private meetings by segment of congregation to discuss your resignation	47	
Beginning of heavy drinking by immediate family member	46	
Marital reconciliation	45	
Retirement	45	
Change in health of a family member	44	
Problem with children	42	
Pregnancy	40	
Sex difficulties	39	
Gain of new family member	39	
New job in new line of work	38	
Change of financial state	38	
Death of close friend	37	
Increased arguing with spouse	35	
Mortgage over \$100,000 for home	31	
Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30	
New job in same line of work	30	
Son or daughter leaving home	29	
Trouble with in-laws	29	
Outstanding personal achievement	28	
Start or stop of spouse's employment	26	

Holiday away	26	
Start or finish of school	26	
Death of peer	26	
Offer of call to another parish	26	
Change in living conditions	25	
Revision of personal habits	24	
Change in residence	20	
Change in schools	20	
Change in recreation	19	
Change in social activities	18	
Mortgage or loan of less than \$100,000	17	
Change of sleeping habits	16	
Developing of new friendships	16	
Change in eating habits	15	
Stressful continuing education experience	15	
Major program change	15	
Vacation at home	13	
Minor violation of the law	11	
Your total		

Add up your score and check it against the following list to get a measure of the impact on you of major life changes:

Overall Score	Usual impact of stress
50 or below	Unusually low
51-100	Stress very manageable
101-150	Stress moderately manageable
151-200	Borderline - mild concern appropriate
201-250	Mildly serious
251-300	Moderately serious
301-350	Very serious
351 & above	Alarming

Why not do this again in 6 months? Your situation might be clearer or there might be other issues you need to consider.

How would you answer this question, 'When I get stressed I...?'

How would someone who knows you very well answer that question? Ask them.

3 Settling in Expectations

What should you do in the first week?

What will you do in the first month?

What will you do in the first six months?

What are your plans?

3.1 Questionnaire

One of the major sources of conflict in ministry is unmet expectations. Some expectations are stated, some are not. One way of knowing where you are heading (rather than simply assuming) is to ask questions. In an appendix to this paper there is a questionnaire containing lots of great questions for prospective students to ask as they think about going to ministry placement. Why not ask these questions in order to make your expectations more realistic?

3.2 Job Description

What is your job description for your new role? A job description is a very important way of managing expectations. You cannot know everything, and neither can the church you are going to. A job description should describe accurately and economically what you will be doing. Later in the paper we discuss the importance of a job description, and what to do when you get one.

3.3 Context and situation

Students leaving college can often under-estimate the importance of understanding the context that they are going to. Recognize that you will need to spend time understanding the context, for example by meeting with key lay leaders and understanding where they are coming from and why they do things. This will probably take at least a month to work out actions and attitudes that are obviously different to yours, but longer to understand the culture of the place. A list of ideas to understand your future context and situation is detailed later in the paper.

3.4 Family

Lots of people leaving college think that the best thing that they can do is to move into their office when they move to their new location. Their priority is lining up the commentaries in a row. However, moving is a very stressful experience, both for you and for your spouse (if you have one) and your children (if you have them). This is not just something that applies to the first week. Why not spend time doing a lot of firsts with your family – your first trip to the new school, your first trip to the shops. Your entire family is going through a process of transition. It will be much more helpful to go through this transition together. Why not spend your first month visiting and getting to know the members of your congregation, and doing this with your spouse? Re-look at your settling-in expectations. Do they need to be re-prioritised in the light of this?

4 Emotional Issues in Transition

4.1 Anxiety

What am I anxious about in leaving college? There are several possible areas:

How will my relationships go?

Will anybody like me?

Will I be a success?

Am I going to be competent in my new job? College training in some ways helps us to be incompetent in what we will be doing. College has removed me from friendships with normal people, and I have been surrounded by people who talk about parsing Greek and Hebrew verbs. Leaving college means re-entering the world of people who have full-time secular jobs, and who have probably never even heard of either Karl Barth or textual criticism. How will I handle that?

However, the student leaving college is not the only one who may be anxious. Due to the congregation's unrealistic expectations, they may be worried that you will not be as good as they want. Because you are coming straight out of college, you probably won't be able to meet all their expectations. The best method of handling this situation is to identify the elephant in the room. Give people permission to compare you to your predecessor, but point out that you are not your predecessor. Acknowledging the issue is more important than finding a solution.

4.2 Loss

4.2.1 Have you processed the loss?

There is no simple three-step formula for processing loss, however acknowledging the issue goes a long way in beginning the process.

4.2.2 Has the congregation you are going to processed the loss of your predecessor?

Allow the congregation to grieve the loss of your predecessor.

Be patient with your ministry position, and recognize that grief takes time to deal with.

4.3 Lack of Engagement

One challenge of finishing up in your current ministry location is remaining engaged. It is very easy to lose engagement with church as you prepare to leave. In order to remain engaged, acknowledge the issue, and then work against your default position, which is disengagement. Try to pace yourself through the year, and take on ministries with the end in mind. In other words, in your final year of a ministry placement, take on something that you will hand over, or something that is transitional.

5 Process of Transition

The process of transition involves five phases.² These are listed below. If you are married, your family will be going through this process as well as you. However, they will only be going through the process with you if you make time to go through this together.

5.1 Involvement (Settled)

In this stage, you are settled. You are known and appreciated in your relationships; you are an insider.

² . Much of the material concerning the stages of transition comes from a paper from Moore Theological College entitled "Stages of Transition".

You know what you are doing.

5.2 Leaving (Unsettling)

This is a time of farewells, closure, and recognition that one chapter of your life is finishing and another is about to begin. It involves loosening ties, and withdrawing from responsibilities. It involves transitioning your existing responsibilities to others, and preparing for the new responsibilities that you will take on. In this stage of transition you are oriented to the future. People have a variety of responses to leaving: grief, procrastination, resentment, expectations, and idealization. It is a time to seek closure in your existing context.

5.2.1 Achieving closure – build a RAFT

5.2.1.1 Reconciliation

Ask for forgiveness where necessary

Straighten out any broken relationships

5.2.1.2 Affirmation

Affirm those who have been part of your lives in writing. This doesn't need to be long, but it should be heartfelt.

5.2.1.3 Farewell

Say goodbye to people at college and at church.

5.2.1.4 Think ahead

Think through your expectations of the future and make preparations.

5.3 Transition (chaos)

This is an in-between time. You have left, but you haven't yet arrived. It starts before you have actually physically left your previous context, because you mentally check out before you physically leave. This is a time of uncertainty. It is also a time of grieving and possibly of isolation. At the same time, due to chaos frustrations may be exaggerated; things may be lost or damaged in the move.

5.4 Entering (Resettling)

This is a time of emotional instability – anxiety, grief, disappointment. It is also a time for us to wonder who we are; what is our identity in our new setting? Our relationships at this phase may be superficial, and tentative. We need to work at initiating relationships, even when others seem to have their quota of relationships filled. It is a time of meeting lots of new people, and taking risks. It is also a time when we are without status – people often do not understand our experience or knowledge.

However, our lack of knowledge of the local context can be helpful in building relationships with your neighbours/congregation/community. If you don't know where the best butcher in town is, asking the members of your congregation is a good way of building friendships.

At this stage we need to beware of self-centeredness, and asking “Why don't people care?”

One simple help at this time is a visual aid – pictures of friends or places that remind us of normal life.

5.5 Involvement (Settled)

Back to where we started.

6 Time frame

How long will the process of transition take? It depends on several factors:

How clear your job description is

How soon you have real chats about how the church runs

How long it takes to understand the church's culture

Although the time taken varies, it will probably take at least a year after the move until you are settled in your ministry placement.

7 Suggested Plan for Leaving College

Now

7.1 Dealing with disengagement

Consider the following steps to minimize disengagement as you prepare to leave:

1. Acknowledge the issue.
2. Actively work against the default position (i.e., disengagement)
3. Pace yourself.
4. Take on a ministry that you will hand over, or that is transitional. Identify who you will hand over to when you leave, and prepare and train these people for that transition.

7.2 Preaching

If you are preaching more than once a month in your ministry placement, then you should start to plan for what you will be preaching now. There are a couple of ways to get a head-start on this:

- Preach for four weeks in a row in your FES block placement, and keep those sermons as a series that you can use in your ministry placement.
- Convince your minister in your current church to allow you to preach for four weeks in a row (for example, over January).

7.3 Self-care Strategies to deal with leaving college

7.3.1 Spiritual Self-Care

Spend time with God's word and in prayer

7.3.2 Physical self-care

- Sleep,
- Eat well
- Get exercise.

7.3.3 Relational self-care

Keep talking with those who can help you to keep a sense of perspective.

Work on establishing a support system.

Take time to care for others

Consider who you will stay in contact with after college. You need to stay in contact with some people, but you cannot stay in contact with everyone.

Talk with people about the anxiety and stress of the process of transition.

Talk with people about the process of loss that arises from leaving college.

If you are married, ensure that you talk with your spouse about both the anxiety and the loss involved in leaving college.

7.3.4 Mental self-care

Don't be too hard on yourself. Have realistic expectations. See previous sections on job description and future ministry context and situations.

Speaking to prospective ministry placements

7.4 Job Description

Get a job description of your future role

If you have a spouse, discuss your job description with them.

Discuss your job description with your future ministry placement. Clarify also what, if any, are the expectations on your spouse with your future ministry placement.

Ask questions and expect to get reasonable answers

7.5 Future ministry context and situation

After using the questionnaire in the appendix, here are some questions to ask yourself about the situation

you are going in to:

Are you a replacement for someone else? Who are you replacing?

Are you expected to be competent from day one? This is a rhetorical question, but if people expect you to be immediately competent, and you are fresh out of college, you will benefit from bursting that unrealistic expectation up front.

Are the expectations of your congregation formed by a previous super-hero? Have you bought into those unrealistic expectations? In other words, are you being realistic about what you can achieve in your first month, and in your first six months?

If you are married, have you talked through these issues with your wife? If your wife has bought into unrealistic expectations (“Oh yes, my husband knows what he is doing...”) and yet knows that you are incompetent (because of inexperience), then she is complicit in deception. Deception of any sort in ministry is so often destructive and unhelpful.

Once you are appointed

7.6 Location

When someone moves to a new place, they are suddenly ignorant of just about everything. Where is the best place to buy some meat? Where do I get my car fixed? There are a thousand questions like this. You cannot avoid a sense of dislocation when you are moving, but you can plan for it. Why not get a map of where you are going? Learn what the place has, and does not have.

7.7 Preaching

Ask about what sermons have been preached recently. Start planning your preaching roster.

Three months before you leave

Get a moving checklist, and start using it.

See <http://www.aussie.com.au/assets/documents/home-loan/move-with-confidence.pdf>

Start building your raft, if you need to, then attempt reconciliation. Start planning your farewell and who you will affirm.

One month before you leave

Finish building your raft.

Farewell your current situation

Affirm those who have been important to you

First week in your new placement

Recognise that you are in a time of transition. Recall your expectations of what you can achieve in your first week, and be ready to review them if necessary.

First month in your new placement

Spend time getting to know your congregation, and go visiting people with your spouse, so that you get to know your new church together.

Organise a retreat group to allow honest and open sharing with other pastors.

Organise and plan your holidays – see “A Balanced Life in Ministry” by David Thurston

(<http://www.abbotsfordpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/A-Balanced-Life-in-Ministry.docx>)

for more details.

First year in your new placement

Spend some time in a marriage enrichment weekend.

8 Appendix: Questionnaire

Ask questions of your ministry placement, in order to clarify expectations.³

8.1 Questions and considerations for a pastor to ask about the church

Why does this church exist?

What has God called this congregation to do and be?

What do you see as this church's greatest strength?

What does this church do best?

If you would like one thing to be different about the church, what would it be?

What do you see as being the most significant event in the life of the Church in the past 10 years?

What for you has been the most upsetting event in the life of the church in the past 10 years?

In what way is this community different from 10 years ago?

In what ways do you think this community will be different in 10 years time?

Describe the church at worship.

Who makes up the congregation? Where do they come from?

What areas of ministry is the congregation involved in?

What new ministries have been added in the past few years?

What ministries have ceased in the past few years?

In what other ways has the church changed over recent years?

What is your vision for the church?

If someone left the church \$100,000 in a will, and how might the congregation decide to spend the money?

What areas of concern do you think need to be addressed by this congregation?

What kinds of things did your previous pastor do particularly well?

In what areas would you like a pastor to have more expertise?

³ These questions come from "Managing the Call Process: Guidelines for pastors and churches of the Baptist Churches of NSW and ACT", by the Pastoral Advisory Taskforce.

8.2 Questions for a pastor to ask of a church with a school

What level of involvement is expected of the past in the school?

What time allocations are expected concerning work in the church and work in the school?

Are the pastor's children expected to attend the school?

8.3 Questions for a church concerning its expectations of a new pastor

How long do you expect a new pastor to stay?

What part do you expect the new pastor to play in the life of the congregation in the next 5 to 10 years?

Why do you think that I may be that person? Why are you interested in me?

Are you aware of my ministry strengths and limitations?

How has the church supported the pastor and his or her family in the past, besides financially?

How should a pastor spend their time?

On average, how many hours per week would you expect the pastor to give in the church's ministry?

What steps might a pastor take to continue to develop their spiritual life and ministry skills? What place is there for the pastor to be doing further study, attending retreats, conferences, et cetera?

Describe the place of the pastor's spouse and family in the life of the church.

What involvement might pastor had in denominational affairs and in the local community?

What relationship should the pastor have with each of the churches ministries? For example, is the pastor chairperson of all organizations? Is the pastor expected to attend all meetings?