

## **A Transitional Ministry Misstep**

**By Bob Young**

Several years ago, I was asked to help the elders in a local congregation chart a ministry transition between preachers. The church existed on the outskirts of a major metropolitan area. When the church had begun 30 years earlier, its location was ahead of the population growth exodus into the suburbs. When the elders contacted me, the leading edge of the population growth had moved beyond the church location. Nonetheless, the church was vibrant and active with a membership of 400-500. In addition to the pulpit minister, the church employed an associate-education ministry and a youth minister.

With the departure of the pulpit minister, the associate minister was interested in the pulpit position. In addition, the elders had already identified several external prospects who were working in vibrant, growing churches. (A part of the story told in this summary requires that I also say that during the consultation, the elders asked me if I would consider “putting my name in the hat.”) The associate minister had worked with the church for almost 20 years and was well-liked. Nonetheless, the elders were not confident that he was the best choice for moving forward.

Rather than communicating that belief to the church, the elders had decided that they would let the church arrive at that conclusion on its own. The plan was to bring in numerous excellent, capable, well-qualified candidates so that the eventual choice would automatically exclude the associate minister.

To make a long story short, I worked with the elders in the consulting role, seeking to help them move forward. When they asked me about my possible interest in the preaching position, I told them that they needed to decide, either yes or no, about the internal candidate before moving on to external candidates. If the decision was no, then the associate minister could decide the direction of his future ministry. I emphasized the need to make the internal decision first to avoid splitting the church, since the associate minister had his “followers” who were supporting him as the next preacher. I told them that I would have no interest until they decided about internal candidate.

The rest of the story. They continued to include the associate as a candidate. They interviewed several good candidates and eventually hired a new preacher, asking the associate minister to continue in his associate role. More details are not essential to the story. Seven years later, after many members had left for area congregations, the congregation could no longer sustain ministry in its location and merged into another larger church.

The lesson needed in many churches that find themselves between preachers is that the decision must be made about internal candidates, the decision must be communicated, and the transitional ministry period should generally exclude current ministry staff from the transitional preaching role. This truth points to the wisdom is using a transitional ministry resource person who can help the local church manage well the exciting possibilities of the transitional period.