

A quick way to raise my blood pressure is to refer to a congregation without a called pastor as “vacant.” How can a church be vacant when the saints gather faithfully to hear God’s Word and receive Christ’s Body and Blood, when works of mercy and witness are being performed, and when spiritual care is offered to one another? Surely the Holy Spirit has not vacated such a fellowship simply because the pastoral office is in transition.

Indeed, these times of transition can be positive occasions of renewal in a congregation. Lay people can learn to use their gifts more effectively and experience how the Holy Spirit can use them to build up the Body of Christ. Transitions provide the freedom to examine how a congregation functions and to consider whether new directions can be initiated, and perhaps whether once-effective programs have outlived their usefulness.

It is good to hear the Gospel proclaimed by different voices from the pulpit. No two pastors preach or lead worship in the same way; God seems to like variety. It was not the Almighty who invented cloning, and pastors are not clones. It is good to have time to prepare to receive the next called pastor and his or her unique gifts. You can also be helped to reflect on the gifts you desire and perhaps characteristics you do not want in your next spiritual leader. And you can look for ways that you can continue to be supportive so the pastor can focus on those tasks specifically belonging to the pastoral office.

We in the NALC intentionally have rejected a “top-down” bureaucracy in our structure, and the time is long past when it is healthy for a congregation to have a pastor who is a dictator or tyrant. There was a day when some pastors were able to do this, and I suspect many of our problems in churches grow out of precisely that style of leadership.

The Bible is clear that the Holy Spirit pours out gifts that differ among the members of the Body, in order that we need one another and grow in love toward each other. No pastor has all the spiritual gifts a church needs, nor do any of the members. It is also true that every pastor has weaknesses and faults, and there is need for grace and forgiveness among one another in any church.

Please do not look at your time of transition as a hiatus from growth in ministry but as an opportunity God gives for renewal and increased vitality.

I will do my best as your interim pastor to work alongside of you during this time, whether it is short or long. Please let me know what you need from me, and also please look for ways God can use you and your gifts to strengthen Bethany during this transition.

Above all, let us continue to pray for one another, and for God to lead the right pastor to Bethany, in His time and in His way.

Steve Shipman, Interim Pastor