

GUIDE

The New Pastor's First 90 Days: A Strategic Launch Guide

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Introduction — Why the First 90 Days Define the Next Decade

The pastoral installation service is over. The moving boxes are unpacked. The congregation is watching with hopeful, evaluative eyes, wondering: Who is this person? What is he going to do? Is this going to be good or bad? And the new pastor is asking his own questions, with significantly less information: Who are these people? What happened here before I arrived? Who holds the real power? What do they need? What do they fear? And what on earth have I gotten myself into?

The first 90 days of a new pastoral assignment are the most consequential period in the relationship between pastor and congregation. The impressions formed in this period — about the pastor's character, his pastoral sensitivity, his leadership style, his respect for what came before, and his vision for what comes next — will be extremely difficult to revise later. The congregation that decides in week three that the new pastor is arrogant, impatient, or dismissive of their history will filter everything he does subsequently through that lens. The congregation that decides he is humble, genuinely curious, and deeply caring will extend the trust capital that makes everything subsequently possible.

The governing principle of this guide is simple but non-negotiable: in the first 90 days, your primary job is not to lead. It is to learn. The leading will come — and it will be far more effective, far more sustainable, and far less costly for having been preceded by genuine learning. The new pastor who has listened deeply before he speaks, who understands before he changes, who has earned trust before he spends it, is positioned for sustained fruitful ministry. The one who has not is positioned for exhausting conflict.

Know well the condition of your flocks, and give attention to your herds.

— Proverbs 27:23

Part One: The First 30 Days — Orientation and Listening

Listen Before You Lead

The first month in a new pastoral assignment should be dominated by two activities: learning the systems and beginning the listening campaign. These activities are not glamorous, and they do not produce visible results that satisfy the congregation's desire to see their new pastor lead. But they lay the foundation without which everything visible will be built on sand.

Week 1-2: Systems Orientation

The physical and administrative landscape of the new assignment must be mapped before it can be navigated. In the first two weeks, the pastor should: meet individually with every staff member, understand the specific responsibilities, challenges, and history of each role; review the financial health of the organization with the board treasurer or finance committee — cash flow, giving trends, budget performance, outstanding obligations, and any significant financial concerns or opportunities; understand the governance structures — who has authority over what decisions, what the board's role is, how significant decisions are made, and where the formal decision-making authority resides versus where actual power is exercised; and learn the key volunteers and stakeholders — the long-tenured, high-influence people whose relationships and trust will significantly determine the pastor's effectiveness.

Weeks 3-6: The Listening Campaign

Beginning in week three, the pastor should launch a systematic listening campaign — individual, unhurried conversations with as many members of the congregation as possible, with the explicit and genuine purpose of understanding their experience of the church, their history with it, their hopes for it, and their concerns. This listening campaign is not a pastoral visit — it is a structured information-gathering process that is simultaneously one of the most significant pastoral investments the new pastor can make.

The listening meeting protocol: 45-60 minutes per conversation; four questions that are asked consistently of everyone: (1) Tell me about your history here — how did you come to this church, and what has kept you? (2) What do you love most about this congregation? (3) What concerns or challenges do you see? (4) If there were one thing you could tell me as your new pastor, what would it be? Then listen. Do not defend, problem-solve, or disagree. Simply receive, ask follow-up questions, and take careful notes.

The listening meeting process should include: every current staff member and key volunteer leader; every board member, elder, and deacon; 20-30 long-tenured congregants (5 or more years); 10-15 newer members (within the past 2 years); key community leaders — the mayor, police chief, school principal, local nonprofit directors; denominational leadership and neighboring pastors; and if possible, the immediate past pastor (if available and if the conversation can be genuinely helpful rather than destabilizing).

Part Two: Days 31-60 — Assessment and Relationship Building

Seeing Clearly Before Acting

By the end of the first month, the new pastor has accumulated a significant amount of information — about the congregation's history, its culture, its strengths, its wounds, its hopes, and its fears. The second month is the period for organizing this information into a more systematic assessment: an honest, accurate picture of the organization the pastor has inherited, including its most important strengths to build on and its most significant challenges to address.

The Honest Assessment

The honest assessment of a new pastoral assignment requires looking at several dimensions simultaneously. **SPIRITUAL HEALTH:** Is there genuine evidence of life — prayer, Scripture engagement, conversions, genuine community, spiritual fruit — in this congregation? Or has the institutional form persisted while the spiritual substance has diminished? **RELATIONAL HEALTH:** What is the quality of the relationships within the congregation? Is there genuine trust, genuine friendship, genuine mutual care — or is this primarily a collection of people who attend the same services without deep bonds? **LEADERSHIP HEALTH:** Are the formal and informal leaders people of genuine character, genuine calling, and genuine competence? Or are there significant character, competence, or calling deficits in key leadership positions that will need to be addressed? **CULTURAL HEALTH:** What does this congregation's culture communicate to outsiders, to new attendees, and to itself? Is it genuinely welcoming? Is it genuinely missional? Is it genuinely honest? Or has it developed patterns of institutional self-protection, cultural exclusivity, or performative religion that undermine its stated values?

Identifying Key Leaders and Relationships

Every congregation has both formal and informal power structures, and the new pastor who fails to understand both will find himself surprised by opposition that he did not see coming. Formal power is held by the people with official titles: board members, elders, deacons, committee chairs. Informal power is held by the people who shape opinion, maintain institutional memory, and whose approval or disapproval significantly affects what the congregation will accept from its leadership. These two groups often overlap — but not always.

The informal power holders are typically the people with the longest tenure, the strongest relational networks within the congregation, and the greatest personal investment in the congregation's current culture and direction. Understanding who they are, what they value, and what would make them allies rather than opponents is strategic intelligence of the highest importance. The new pastor who has invested in genuine relationships with these individuals before any significant change is attempted will encounter significantly less opposition than the one who changes things before building those relationships.

Part Three: Days 61-90 — First Leadership and Vision

Beginning to Lead

The final month of the first 90 days is the transition from pure listening to beginning leadership — not full leadership, not major change, but the first demonstrations of the pastor's actual approach to leading. These demonstrations are watched with enormous care by the congregation, and they will be interpreted through the lens of everything the congregation has observed in the first 60 days.

Identifying and Executing Early Wins

Early wins are changes or initiatives that are: low in controversy (most people will agree they are positive changes); high in visibility (people will notice and appreciate them); clearly beneficial (they make something better in an obvious way); and achievable quickly (they can be accomplished within weeks, not months). They are not the pastor's most important changes — they are the changes that build the credibility capital for the more important changes that will come later. Choosing them wisely requires the intelligence gathered in the listening campaign: what do people love about this church that hasn't been celebrated recently? What obvious need has gone unaddressed? What simple improvement would make a visible difference?

The First Vision Communication

At or near the end of the first 90 days, many new pastors offer their first substantive communication about the direction they sense God calling the congregation — sometimes from the pulpit, sometimes in a written letter to the congregation, sometimes in a special congregational meeting. This communication is eagerly anticipated and carefully scrutinized. It should be: honest (sharing what the pastor has genuinely observed and discerned, not a template imported from somewhere else); humble (acknowledging what the pastor doesn't yet know, and framing vision as discernment in process rather than final declaration); pastoral (communicating genuine love for the specific people of this specific congregation, not generic enthusiasm for ministry); and forward-looking (offering a sketch of the direction, not a full strategic plan, giving the congregation something to hope toward without overpromising).

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Part Four: Preaching in the First 90 Days

Introducing Yourself Through the Pulpit

The first 13 sermons preached in a new congregation are among the most consequential of a pastor's ministry there. They introduce his theology, his hermeneutic, his pastoral sensibility, his emotional range, his intellectual depth, and his personal character in a form that the entire congregation receives simultaneously. They will be discussed, evaluated, and remembered long after the content has faded. And they will shape the congregation's working understanding of who the new pastor is and what kind of leadership they can expect from him.

Preaching Philosophy for the First 90 Days

Several principles should govern preaching in the first 90 days. **PREACH FROM A BOOK OF THE BIBLE**, not topically. Expository preaching from a continuous text communicates: that this pastor takes the Bible seriously as his authority; that he is not using the pulpit to advance a hidden agenda; and that the congregation's formation will be shaped by the whole counsel of Scripture rather than the pastor's particular concerns. It also removes the appearance — often accurate in new pastoral situations — that topical sermon choices are indirect commentaries on the congregation's perceived problems.

AVOID SECONDARY CONTROVERSIES. The first 90 days is not the time to preach on baptism mode, eschatological charts, political controversies, or the specific doctrinal issues where your tradition differs from other evangelical traditions. These subjects are not unimportant, but they cost trust capital that the pastor does not yet have. Spend the first 90 days building trust capital. Spend it wisely later.

THE GOLDEN RULE OF NEW PASTORATES

The first impression you must make on a congregation is not "visionary" or "gifted." It is "trustworthy." Trustworthiness is the currency of pastoral leadership, and it cannot be borrowed, performed, or manufactured. It must be earned — slowly, consistently, genuinely — through the accumulated weight of integrity, compassion, and sustained faithful presence over time.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

— Luke 2:52

"The pastor who listens deeply in the first 90 days will lead powerfully in the years that follow. The one who leads without listening will be navigating blind — and will pay the cost in opposition, mistakes, and lost trust that could have been avoided." — James Bell

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