

After entering college, I soon realized that Christian ministry, rather than engineering or architecture, was the direction God was leading me. Out of the past 29 years of full-time Christian ministry, I have spent the last five years at the First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco. When I was called as the Senior Pastor in 1998, I was challenged with the responsibility of retrofitting and renovating an un-reinforced brick building, constructed in 1908, to comply with the city's earthquake-related seismic-safety codes. I had never experienced such a task before. And, in retrospect, my seminary didn't offer a course on building construction either. Our successful completion of a \$1.6-million-dollar retrofit and renovation project was the result of others who have been blessed with all the necessary gifts to do the job. We had a renowned retired soil engineer who taught at UC Berkeley, an architect, a contractor who owns his own business, a lighting specialist, a lawyer who could read the fine print in the contracts, and an employee in the city's planning department who was able to get our applications through quickly. About all that was missing were the pastors who provided prayer, encouragement, and vision to reassure ourselves of the reason for the project in the first place.

To seismically retrofit a building, the procedure is first to drive steel posts down into the bedrock. With these posts firmly in the earth, each floor of the building was tied to these posts with steel bars. These long steel bars had rods that bolted the old bricks on the inside as well as on the outside. Since the outside bricks would now have metal plates holding these rods, we decided to install decorative washers to make the outside appearance more attractive. The decorative washers appeared to look like a raindrop when positioned in a particular way. One of my few contributions to our retrofit project was to suggest that the installed washers should remind us of the Song of Moses,

*Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak;  
let the earth hear the words of my mouth.  
May my teaching drop like rain,  
my speech condense like dew;  
like gentle rain on grass;  
like showers on new growth  
(Deut. 32:1-2 NRSV).*

Now, every time I look up at our sacred building and lead people to see what our project was like, I always point out the decorative washers that are becoming a visible symbol of the importance of teaching God's word in the world. Now our church building is encircled with the "raindrops" of God's teachings.

God gives us many gifts for ministry. Each one of us could have chosen a career other than full-time Christian work. I might have been a pretty good engineer or an architect. But when I heard God calling me to Christian ministry, I followed Jesus to be his disciple. But what is amazing is that I never lost my interest in how things work, and when it came time for me, along with others on the retrofit committee, to read the blueprints for our church building, I was able to do that too. All those days playing with a dry cell battery or doing mechanical drawings had not been wasted when I committed myself to ministry. These interests and skills are also the blueprints in my ministry today.

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## **TRANSITION IN MINISTRY**

*By David Chapman*



In 1988, after eleven years in ministry, with ten of the eleven years in the pastorate, I entered the School of Theology at Virginia Union University. This move proved to be the defining line in my transition in ministry. Since 1991, the year I graduated from Union, my twenty-six years of ministry have been defined in terms of Pre-Union and Post-Union.

My Pre-Union period of ministry began with my initial sermon in 1977. Four years prior to my initial sermon, I had graduated from Bluefield State College in Bluefield, WV, with a B.S. Degree in Secondary Education. I proceeded to spend 10 of the next 15 years in bi-vocational ministry.

These days, in my Post-Union era, being able to pastor full-time, I thank God for youth. Back when I started in ministry, I taught school, which required traveling 40 miles one-way each day. For the first two years of my ministry I pastored two small, loving congregations in the coalfields of West Virginia. These two churches offered me a great opportunity to learn what pastoring was all about. I know now that they were the training ground for my next transition.

During the next eight and a half years, I pastored a church that, when they called me as their pastor, had the worst reputation of any church in the area. The church had been without a pastor for three and a half years. When I arrived in January of 1981, there were strong power bases in place. I entered in prayer from the very beginning. The popular wager on my tenure was that I would last no longer than six months. I found out that the people longed for a strong pastor. Through much prayer and God's guidance, I stayed for over eight years. The church grew, prospered, and became highly respected throughout the Association and State Convention. During this period, I recognized a need to further my theological education. In 1984, I enrolled in Southeastern Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, NC. By this time our family had grown to five. Like many ministers, I realize that the call embraces the entire family. During the summers of 1984 and 1985, I traveled to Southeastern for classes. This was when I realized how much I needed to learn. There developed in me an unquenchable hunger for more theological learning.

While attending Southeastern, I had a friend who had moved his entire family from Indiana. I also noticed that near the end of the summer term there were a number of families moving to the campus.

Over the next three years, I prayed that God would put a seminary near enough to where we lived so that we would not have to move. In July of 1988, my family and I packed up everything and moved to Richmond, VA, so that, at the age of 38, after 15 years of teaching and 10 years of pastoring, I could enter Virginia Union University to satisfy my hunger and yield to what I believed to be the will of God.

I don't have the time or space to tell all I desire to tell; suffice it to say that, as you and I obey God, God will never let us down. As the Apostle Paul

says in Philippians 1:20, "it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed" (RSV).

Our move to Richmond came at a time in my life when finances were stable; my church was blessed to grow and prosper; the young people I taught and their parents revered me; and my family was happy and contented. Then our income plummeted, and the house we had recently remodeled was left empty with an active note for the remodeling cost. For the first time in her life, my wife had to leave all she knew, and our children had to say goodbye to their friends. I know that even though we were moving, we were blessed because our move was voluntary.

After setting up shop in Richmond, my family and I traveled over 600 miles each weekend to and from the church I was pastoring. I'm ever grateful to that congregation for their support and understanding during that period of ministry.

After I finished my first year at Union in July of 1989, I received a call to pastor the Union Branch Baptist Church in Chesterfield, VA. Union Branch was a small, rural church that was basically in the maintenance mold. Upon accepting this pastorate, I challenged the congregation to allow me to have one full-time job—that of serving as their pastor. I started my ministry on October 1, 1989, at a salary of \$15,000 a year, and no benefits. My family and I have just completed our fourteenth year of ministry at Union Branch. The church continues to grow and prosper. Our children are all in college, in both undergraduate and graduate schools. My wife, Beverly, and I are in the midst of a second honeymoon. Financially, we are just getting back to the level of income we were realizing in 1988, but we have more today than we ever had. Like many of you who are reading this article, I know not what tomorrow holds as a minister and as a pastor, but I'm so thankful, I know who holds tomorrow.

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*Transition in  
Ministry  
Continued  
by David Chapman*



*The Rev. David L. Chapman serves as Pastor of the High Street Baptist Church in Roanoke, VA. He is a past Vice President of the Ministers Council.*

I was privileged to write a transition in ministry piece for "Minister" back in the Spring of 2004. The article was a snapshot of my then 27 years in ministry. I closed that particular article with these words: "I know not what tomorrow holds as a minister and as a pastor, but I'm so thankful I know Who holds tomorrow."

Well—a year later, in the spring of 2005, I found myself trying to peep around the corner that divides today and tomorrow to see if God really had a firm grip. I had become content after 16 years of fruitful, in-depth, expanding, and of course, at times trying ministry at the Union Branch Baptist Church in Chesterfield, Virginia. I could see myself retiring from Union Branch. Then to my spirit comes this still small voice, quiet whisper, distant beat of a drum (some of you know what I'm talking about): "Get ready to go - your work is finished here." In the other ear I could hear the Temptations of Motown Fame singing, "It was just my imagination running away with me!" At Union branch, there was a nice home, good neighbors, a growing, loving, warm, supportive congregation, new sanctuary and office complex, steadily increasing pay, excellent benefits and supportive care, and retirement looming on the horizon.

At Union Branch I knew who was who and what was what. We never realize the value of this and how empowering it is until we have to go to a place in our lives where we don't know who is who and what is what, especially at the age of 56. For me, my age became a more significant factor in affecting my faith than I would have ever imagined. I can remember when in my 20s, 30s, or even 40s, I could be compared to my namesake David. When presented with a challenge to my faith, I would take that sling shot and a few small stones and run to meet the

challenge. At 56, I found myself more like Gideon — "Lord, are you sure it's me you want? If so, let this fleece be dry in the morning and the grass all around it wet." Well, it's now tomorrow morning, Lord...

In March of 2005, the challenge began to take shape. I received a request to be the guest preacher for the High Street Baptist Church of Roanoke, Virginia. High Street was searching for a pastor. Truth be told, I was not looking for a church. I had a good one, one that, in my opinion, was exceptional. But in the back of my mind I could hear, "Your work is finished at Union Branch." High Street was one of the better known pulpits in the state of Virginia and was noted in many parts of the country. Many ministers just wanted the opportunity to preach in its pulpit. High Street had a distinguished list of former pastors who were noted preachers: Noel C. Taylor, Fred G. Sampson, Robert J. Smith, to name but a few. The Rev. Noel C. Taylor pastored the church for over 37 years with the distinction of being the first and thus far only African-American mayor of the city. After his retirement, the call was extended and a new minister assumed the pastorate of High Street. During his administration, the church experienced a split. To add insult to injury, because of the church's noted status in the community, the split was a very public event. I accepted the invitation to preach at the morning worship service on March 18, 2005. Shortly thereafter, I was asked to submit my resumé for the congregation's consideration of me for the position of pastor.

By this time in my career, I had turned away advances from other churches that wanted me to apply because I knew God wanted me to stay at Union Branch. This time it was different. "Your time is up," the voice in my head said. "Your work is finished here." Well, I submitted my resumé, believing that God was at work in it all. One year later, on March 1, 2006, I drove onto the grounds of High Street Baptist Church with an overwhelming mandate to be their next pastor. This was the culmination of almost a year that included a thorough background check, an extended interview and preaching regimen, and signing the first contract as pastor of a church in my 28 years of ministry. Going to Union Branch included my wife, two daughters and son. Our arrival at High Street was minus our three children, who were all young adults by then and out on their own. It's been two years and three months since I accepted the challenge of becoming the pastor of High Street Baptist Church. I was sent to a

people who had been deeply wounded and who had lost trust in pastoral leadership. Year one was one of the most stressful that I had ever experienced in ministry. I could say that the stress was a result of being 56 and taking on such a major task, or coming into a situation not knowing who was who and what was what, or for the first time facing opposition before I could hardly get my feet on the ground. I had to conclude it was none of the above. I've concluded the stress was due to my lack of faith in a God who is able to keep us in the midst of, while seeing us through, any situation, especially if God has called us to be there. We've come a long way, High Street and I, and we've got a good ways to go; but as for me, I know not what tomorrow holds as a minister or as a pastor, but I'm so thankful I know Who holds tomorrow.



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When discussing the experience of congregations in transition, one contributor of **Temporary Shepherds: A Congregational Handbook for Interim Ministry**, draws upon a line from a Marc Connelly play, **Green Pastures**. Spoken by an old deacon, the line goes like this: "Everything nailed down is bustin' loose!" After quoting the astounded deacon's line, the essayist makes the following observation:

Congregations tend to think that they do not change over time, but nothing is further from the truth. Congregations change sig-

nificantly as they respond to different pastoral leaders, to changes in their societal context, and to alterations in their internal circumstances. (p.8)

Alas, most congregations perceive interim periods as fallow times, when in reality, a season of interim ministry can be a time of great fruitfulness. If a congregation reimagines interim ministry as an opportunity for reattuning the congregation's vision, they give themselves permission to embrace the possibility that this time between (settled) pastors can be more about the prospect of a new day for the ministry and vision of the church. It also relieves the church and its next incumbent minister of the expectation the next pastor will be misperceived or subconsciously desired to be "the messiah figure" who will carry out magical "fix it" work for the congregation when he or she arrives on the obligatory white steed.

Especially in longer contracted periods of service (18 months to multi-year), intentional interims can help with the "tangled knots" of congregations long overdue for honest and sustained self-analysis. Intentional interim ministers can equip congregations to ask "big picture" and "frame-bending" questions about the congregation and its horizons. (Gil Rendle and Alice Mann's **Holy Conversations** is an excellent primer for structuring and facilitating this work.) Short term interims might leverage some positive change with congregations; however, a longer period of time ensures congregations will work more incisively with the many facets of a church: congregational history (written and unwritten); governance and leadership transitions; articulating a congregationally-discerned vision for ministry; learning conflict management skills; reinvigorating stewardship conversations - the list of possibilities goes on! With more time and less rush, congregations in transition can learn it is okay to "bust loose" of old wounds, habits, and myopias!

From my own experience, let me share a few observations from the practical side of things. At First Baptist, Bennington, Vermont, the church began efforts to regroup after the last minister departed in September 2005. Upon the advisement of their regional executive minister, the congregation voted to call an intentional interim minister for a three year period. Looking back at the past two years, I credit much of the forward movement which has occurred to the early and firm resolve of the congregation not