

# Introduction

## ***Moving On: Grief in Ministry Transition***

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### Grief in Ministry Transitions

“Whether the ministry was a good experience or not, you grow with people, and leaving weighs heavily on you. It hurts. The grief is very real in leaving a ministry. It seems to go with us, and it affects our thinking about other ministry experiences. I think why it's hard, why it's a painful, why it's heavy, and why it doesn't leave us, is because ministry is what we are called for. It is our job description to be a Minister of Word and Sacrament. Our heart and soul is committed to it. We give it everything.”

The Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand,<sup>i</sup> Fakaofo Kaio, is describing the grief of ministry transitions. This grief has a lot in common with other forms of grief, but it is also distinctive. For Fakaofo this is because of the personal, spiritual and emotional investment that ministers make in their work: “we give it everything.”

Any ending of a ministry involves a unique and complex mix of grief for all involved. The pastoral relationship ends, and all that it was must be reworked and re-storied as it moves from present reality into memory. Grieving our endings takes time, but often we rush on into the next thing. It takes friendship and support, just as we leave our community. It takes honesty, but few people want to hear it. The vulnerability of grieving can conflict with ministers’ self-understanding as the one who cares for everyone else.

Ministers are professional experts on grief. Holding others through endings, dying and bereavement is a core part of the job. However, attending to our own grief and transitions is easier said than done. It helps when we apply what we know about grief to ourselves and our own families. Grieving well releases fresh energy and joy, to be available to new communities and contexts. Grieving releases us more fully into God’s life-long call, through different seasons and expressions of ministry.

Ministry is not just a job. It is understood by those who do it as a divine calling. It can be far easier for us to hear the voice of God in a call to a new beginning than in the ending and the leaving. Does the ending deny the validity of the call? ‘Did God

change his mind?' 'Did I fail my call?' The theological and discernment questions around ending and leaving are difficult, especially when a minister comes to the decision that she can no longer stay. Grief plays a major role in these questions, not just for the minister herself but for her spouse and family.

This book reflects upon the experience of the pastor as he or she works through the process of 'moving on' from a ministry. It explores the complex and compound nature of grief, especially when a ministry has been conflicted and when the decision to leave was difficult. It offers a wealth of experiences from a breadth of cultural contexts, from nearly 40 contributors. The grief of ministry transitions is addressed in prayer and liturgy. There are tools and resources as well as discussion about church processes and polity related to endings such as resignations and retirement.

*Moving On* includes both lay and ordained ministry. While most contributors are ordained ministers there is also discussion of the role of church elders and employed staff. It challenges the church to be a good employer and to realise that the endings matter as much as the beginnings.

Transitions are, by definition, transitory, while a book is permanent. These stories capture a moment in time for the contributors; many are painful moments characterised by discomfort and uncertainty and a reaching out to God for healing and peace. Please be aware that for each of these contributors, life continues; they may now be in a very different place, and more transitions will come.

Our stories are our own. I have tried to avoid blame or any cause for offence in relation to the events and experiences described here. People are not named unless they have contributed directly to the book.<sup>ii</sup> The names of places and parishes from the past in contributor's stories are replaced with a random initial, other than in the brief introductions prior to each chapter.

*Moving On: Grief in Ministry Transition* emerged in conversation and relationship. Most chapters are based on interviews. It is a work of pastoral theology, starting from the assumption that as we attend to our own life experience, including the hard stuff, we encounter Christ. Chapters have an uneven texture, with my own voice appearing and disappearing as I have sought to reveal the conversational nature of this work and at the same time enable each person's words to ring true. The book is well sprinkled with the wonderful poetry of Ana Lisa de Jong, which she has offered with amazing insight and generosity.

## Layers: a Cross-Cultural Conversation

*Shrek:* Ogres are like onions.

*Donkey:* They stink?

*Shrek:* Yes. No!

*Donkey:* They make you cry?

*Shrek:* No.

*Donkey:* If you leave them out in the sun, they turn brown and start sprouting little white hairs?

*Shrek:* No! Onions have layers. Ogres have layers.

*Donkey:* Oh, you both have **layers**. Oh. You know, not everybody likes onions. Cake! Everybody loves cake! Cakes have layers.

*Shrek:* I don't care what everyone likes! Ogres are not like cakes.

*Donkey:* You know what else everybody likes? Parfaits! Have you ever met a person, you say, "Let's get some parfait," they say, "Hell no, I don't like no parfait."? Parfaits are delicious!

*Shrek:* No! You dense, irritating, miniature beast of burden! Ogres are like onions! End of story! Bye-bye!

This moment from the movie ‘Shrek’ has rather worked its way into our culture as a container for complexity. Human experience, like onions, has layers, and the delightful contrast between ogre and donkey suggests the diversity of human responding to pain. The contributors to *Moving On* speak of the layers of their experience of ministry transitions.

Some layers are shared and foundational: the raw emotion of loss, the hunger for connection and human community. The chapters ring with courage in speaking from the heart, from the hope that this vulnerability enables others to reflect with courageous honesty on their own stories.

Culture adds complex layers to human experience. Many of those contributing to this book are part of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, and they represent the cultural diversity of this church which includes Māori, Pacific, European, Asian and African ethnicities. Hearing people from cultures different from our own enriches us, and also reveals what we do not see because we take for granted. Fundamental relationships are viewed and felt differently. The Western view of ‘professional’ ministers who come, do a job, and leave, is not shared by communal cultures such as Cook Islands and Māori, where ministers and congregations share a continuing belonging.

Those who have crossed cultures and nations in their response to God’s call on their lives bring a distinct layer of grieving for another place and way of doing things, even while fully committing to their new context. Ministry is never in isolation from culture, marriage, and families, both nuclear and extended. Even within this country, major changes, such as leaving the military, create a culture-clash.

These contributions share the conviction that God is part of the conversation, and the assumption that the Bible is a central layer in ministry. Each of the interviews and articles reveal ongoing dynamic relating with God, ‘who was and is and is to come’ (Revelation 4:8). Contributors reflect on past calling, present hearing and look forward confidently to God’s presence in the future. The pain, even trauma and heartbreak, in these stories, can be profoundly confronting but yet is held within this conversation with the living Christ.

Contributors explore layers within the Bible and expect scripture to inform experience. Across our diverse cultures the Bible resonates in both common and unexpected ways. Henry Mbambo expresses his dislocation from family in terms of the grief of exiled Israelites for “the songs of Zion” (Psalm 137:3). Sarah Beisly describes the immediacy of Gospel stories in a Kolkata back alley. Fele Nokise re-

examines culture and theology in the light of human pain. The prayer liturgies in Section Four invite spiritual and emotional connection with scripture stories and metaphors, expecting the Spirit of Christ to be present and alive in the points of contact between ancient text and contemporary situations.

The final layer explored in ‘Moving On’ is the institutional one. Ministry, as discussed in these pages, happens in the context of church and under the authority of the church. Collectively we create this thing called ‘church’ and share responsibility for its healthy functioning. Central to this is our collective ability to be the body of Christ with freedom and grace. As we welcome one another into leadership and release one another from leadership, can we be ruled by the Spirit of peace, act with generosity and speak with truth and love?

Ultimately the whole ‘onion’ (or ‘parfait’!) belongs not to us but to the One who made us, called us and shapes us. We are not our own but Christ’s. This complex layered narrative of loss and love is offered as gift, to the wider church, and to God.

### This Heart – Ana Lisa de Jong

(*Living Tree Poetry*)<sup>iii</sup>

My heart is like the onion’s skin,  
shedding layers with the breaking.  
My heart is pressed as the garlic bulb  
until it releases its scent.

Yes, my heart is a growing thing  
that pushes beyond its restraints.  
The shell must give yet<sup>[1]</sup><sub>SFP</sub>  
a thousand times  
for this heart to expand.

### My starting point

So what layers of culture and assumptions am I aware of in myself? I am a fifth generation Pākehā New Zealander, from English and Danish pioneers who settled in Aotearoa. My childhood included several major transitions, between Fiji and Kaikohe, Ruatoria, Gisborne and Tonga. In and out of very different cultures, breaking friendships, losing homes, learning to adjust and make new friends and feel at home somewhere new. The hardest was the move from Tonga to Lower Hutt, age 12, combined with my parents’ separation. It took me a long time to figure out how to be a ‘normal’ Kiwi teenager, and to recover from being bullied.

The church was always part of the story, from the Fiji Indian church of my earliest memories, to family camps with the Gisborne Methodists, to worship in the Royal Palace chapel in Nuku’aloa! My teen years were rescued by the Waiwhetu Methodist Church in Lower Hutt, and I went into youth ministry from that strong base. I have been richly blessed by widely diverse experience of church life, worship, fellowship and mission. Through every turning point and new adventure Jesus Christ remains my Rock and my Way. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. What fascinates me is how this security is in dynamic tension with life’s

'trials and tribulations'. As a pastoral theologian I am drawn into the uncomfortable conversations, toward the points of pain, for I trust the way the Spirit of Jesus gently opens up our pain and pours in light and healing.

### Tough Honesty

I have been an ordained Presbyterian minister for over a decade. In that time I have held, and left, three pastoral appointments in parishes in New Zealand, each quite different from the others. Each I have resigned: one to take up another appointment, one was a difficult decision, and one because my army chaplain husband was posted to a new part of the country. Each ending was very different, and each was a significant part of my ministry and personal formation. Each was an experience of grief.

Yet when I went looking through my books on ministry for insights about the grief of ending a ministry, it was not there. I found much in my books on the beginnings of a ministry, the process and dynamics of call, and much on sustaining in ministry, often with an explicitly stated intention of preventing pastors from resigning their ministries. But I found practically nothing on the tasks and challenges of leaving. Why?

One brutally honest answer came in an article about ministry in an Asian context:

"The failed pastor's family and close relatives undoubtedly will suffer embarrassment, shame, and emotional duress. In an Asian community, becoming a pastor surely calls for a big celebration; but, on the contrary, if one quits the ministry it becomes a major embarrassment."<sup>iv</sup>

In our culture, too, we celebrate the beginnings with much fanfare, but the endings we are far less comfortable with, especially where there is any hint of 'failure'. Some leavings are honoured, e.g. retirement after a long and outwardly successful ministry. Other leavings are far more difficult and wrought with 'emotional duress', even shame.

Church culture (mine at least) is conflict-averse, to the point of non-honesty; awkward silences are the order of the day. As I was 'moving on' from a conflicted parish context I was asked by denominational leadership to "end well". I heard this as an request that I not upset anyone, not say uncomfortable things.

For me, this was contradicted by what my supervisor was saying, and what I knew that God was saying, which was to challenge my need for acceptance and affirmation and my desire to keep the peace. I was devastated to discover how deeply committed I was to the idea that if I tried hard enough everyone would approve of me. God needed to crack that open, and grow me bigger than that. Part of that was dealing with my residual pain from feeling bullied and rejected as a child.

The church, too, can be guilty of bullying and abuse. It grieves me that many who leave ministry do so feeling gutted. To attend to these endings with honesty is to stand with Jesus in a place of persecution. Only Jesus holds the way to healing.

Grief is a strange place. I am no longer in it, though some memories still carry the taste of it. It is a surreal landscape in which things hang awkwardly and loom weirdly. It is pointy and gloomy and cold and lonely. To walk with death and failure is part of our calling, though never a path we choose. The insights of grief theory were, to me, helpful. Any loss takes us on a journey, and the only way out is through. There are

no short-cuts, but there are guides and companions through grief. These do not lessen the pain to be felt, but do keep us moving so that we don't just go around and around.

I hope that this book is a companion for those in ministry, an encouragement to have the hard conversations and to not be afraid to go deep into whatever it is that God is calling us into, even the darkest paths of pain. For Christ is risen; “God’s mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning” (Lamentations 3:22b-23a).

## Dedications

To my fabulous husband, Chris, who has been there through it all.

My heart-felt thanks to all those who have contributed to this book. These are not easy conversations, and each person has been courageous in sharing their story.

Korōria ki te Atua, ko ia te Tīmatanga me te Mutunga, te Karanga me te Kāinga.

Glory to God: Beginning and End, Call and Home.

Āe, ahakoa haere ahau i te awaawa o te ātārangi o te mate, kāhore he kino e wehi ai ahau: nō te mea kei tōku taha koe; ko tāu rākau, ko tāu tokotoko, ko ēna hei oranga ngākau mōku.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.

Psalm 23:4

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<sup>i</sup> At the time of writing, in 2021.

<sup>ii</sup> A notable exception is the name of Rev. Perema Leasi, QSM, whose passing in 2019 is honoured and reflected on. Some contributors have chosen to name their partners and children. Any other people named are published authors.

<sup>iii</sup> Copyright information for this poem, and all of Ana Lisa's poems reprinted here, is in the References section at the conclusion of the book.

<sup>iv</sup> Simon Nagarajan, “Restoration of Pastors Who Left the Ministry in an Honor/Shame-Based Society Like Singapore.” *Presbyterion*, vol. 45, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 184.