

## Guidance for Navigating Change

“Change is the only constant in life,” wrote the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, in a book now existing only in fragments. These words may offer little comfort to persons thrown off balance by predictable life changes – birth, death, marriage, graduation, retirement -- or unexpected circumstances - illness, accident, divorce, fire, job change or loss, natural disaster, and war. In *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes* (Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1980), William Bridges offers insight and strategies for the challenging task of adjusting to new realities and for “coping with the difficult, painful, and confusing times” everyone faces sooner or later. Defining transition as “...the natural process of disorientation and reorientation that marks the turning points of the path of growth,” the author affirms that in spite of its discomfort, transition can lead to renewal and growth. (p. 5)

Pastors and church leaders can help individuals, families, and congregations embrace and navigate change by affirming how normal it is to feel off balance during times of transition. Naming whatever is happening empowers people to deal with it. Denying or “fighting what is” diverts our energy and limits our ability to react creatively to a new situation. Bridges describes three clear stages of transition and discusses the importance of understanding them: ending, an in-between period of uncertainty and confusion, and a new beginning. If we understand where we are in the transition process, both the ending and the period of disorientation become more endurable because we know that eventually we will arrive at the new beginning. Refusing to participate fully in the painful ending or the disturbing period of uncertainty may bring us to the new beginning encumbered by unfinished business and unresolved feelings.

Faith does not mean the absence of doubt and fear, but the willingness to move forward in spite of such feelings. Sound preaching and teaching can help free people from the crippling effects of fear and empower them to decide to do whatever they need to do to live fully, regardless of their circumstances. Presence and companionship can assure persons that they are not alone. In addition to whatever practical help may be offered, kindness, empathy, and understanding can boost the spirits of persons who are overwhelmed and faltering, enabling them to move on.

By helping persons clarify where they are in regard to a transition - ending, disorientation, new beginning, you can support them in working through that stage fully and effectively. Encourage them to consider what they need in order to bring closure to what they are leaving behind. Bridges urges people to reflect on how they have dealt with endings in the past and what they might have learned from those experiences. Those who rush ahead into a new situation perhaps later regret things left undone, goodbyes unsaid, experiences left incomplete. Denying or minimizing an ending may bring persons to a new situation still clinging to the past and closed to new possibilities. Those who avoid the discomfort of “in-between” by too quickly committing to the first opportunities that arise may later regret having to decline more favorable offers. Transition offers the opportunity to try something new, instead of just doing what you have always or usually done.

“Life is a journey, not a destination,” a quotation attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, echoes the words from 1 John 3:2, “...and what we will be is not yet made known.” Christian faith expressed through and within Christian community can help us embrace and navigate uncertainty and change, trusting in God’s ever-present love and guidance.