

District Superintendent's First Year Audio Transcript

Lovett H. Weems, Jr., Director, Lewis Center for Church Leadership

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Introduction [Audio Track 1 – 2:24]

I'm Lovett Weems, director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary. A few years ago, the Lewis Center worked for a year with a new class of district superintendents to identify the competencies needed as they took on the role of District Superintendent. We asked how well prepared they were and what additional skills were needed to fulfill their new role. This research also resulted in a series of more general findings about the relative importance of a superintendent's various activities and the challenges and opportunities facing their churches. We at the Lewis Center have assembled these findings to help other new superintendents as they begin their work.

The research consisted of surveys administered at pivotal times during a superintendent's first year. Each survey focused on a particular "season" of a superintendent's year, such as the Charge Conference Season. Most of the inquiries were open-ended questions. As patterns began to emerge in the responses, subsequent surveys used ranking methods to hone in on specifics and prioritize opinions. A series of snapshots emerged on issues and concerns related to the specific time periods.

This CD covers four of these seasons — the time between appointment and beginning official duties, the Summer Months, the Charge Conference Season, and the Appointment-Making Season. It also includes the overall findings and recommendations that emerged from the wisdom of this cohort of new superintendents as they reflected on their first year. The Lewis Center offers these findings to you in hopes that they will help equip you for your responsibilities — allowing you to learn from the wisdom and the mistakes of those who have taken on this ministry in the past.

Becoming a District Superintendent: Opportunities and Challenges before Moving Day [Audio Track 2 – 6:31]

This season covers the time from when the new superintendents learned of their appointments until officially beginning after annual conference. For some this was a long time, perhaps beginning in January or February and extending until July 1. For others, the time was much shorter, especially where there needed to be a last minute superintendent appointment.

We wanted to know how the newly appointed but not yet official superintendents used this season and what was most helpful to them in this period.

Some of the things noted as helpful included:

- Planned training and detailed manuals for new superintendents. In conferences where this kind of formal orientation is offered, it is well-received.
- Receiving an annual calendar early
- Having their bishop share clear expectations of the position and of their relationship was important for some.
- Having a cabinet mentor assigned was found helpful as were acts of welcome and caring by the cabinet as a whole

But two things were most helpful: attending Cabinet meetings and conversations with other superintendents.

- Sitting through a cabinet meeting with one's predecessor can provide an opportunity to bond and an ongoing tutorial about how the cabinet works. And meal time and informal conversations during cabinet meetings also proved valuable. While attending the Cabinet meetings put extra pressure on the appointed superintendent, the experience proved extremely valuable.
- And the helpful conversations did not occur only with the superintendent they were following. Conversations with other current and former superintendents were also informative.

We asked specifically how the new superintendent's predecessor was helpful.

- Most important was the **background on churches, clergy, and district issues provided by the predecessor.** One survey respondent said, *my predecessor gave me background on each church including any issues that were particularly important at the moment; explained where there were issues, concerns and opportunities; and left a short bio of each pastor and some reflections about each congregation.*
- **Next, it was helpful to be oriented to the district office files and records. This may involve**
 - receiving an overview of office files and procedures,
 - spending a day of orientation with the predecessor and the administrative assistant,
 - learning about the files related to pastors and congregations
 - becoming familiar with the location of congregations and the structure of leadership
 - and, learning about the finances of the district and how to handle expenses
- **And, it was important to have one's predecessor extend care and consideration to the new DS and family.** For example, one new superintendent noted being invited for dinner at the District parsonage, which allowed the new superintendent's family to look through the house. The predecessor becomes the most important resource person for questions. Returning calls quickly, answering specific questions, being accessible, and even willing to research the answers to some questions are important ways that outgoing superintendents can support and affirm the incoming superintendent.

We asked the new superintendents to share other personal observations about the period from learning of the appointment until beginning official duties. Three issues emerged.

- First was the **difficulty of serving in their current ministry and participating in Cabinet meetings.** As much as they appreciated meeting with the cabinet, they felt often they were doing two jobs at once — caught between trying to make all the cabinet meetings while continuing to be a pastor and helping a congregation move toward transition.

- The second issue is related to the first. For many this was a **stressful time, especially in terms of family stress when there were still children living at home.**
- And, third, some experienced a **difficult transition in the local church they were preparing to leave.** Sometimes the transition was difficult because of their tenure had been either very short or very long. In other cases, difficulties arose because of a mismatch between the congregation and their incoming pastor.

Finally, we asked the new superintendents to reflect on what they wish they had done, learned, or asked before beginning their official duties? Responses to this question show the importance of some of the helps named previously and how missing they are in some conferences.

- **The top response was help getting organized and with procedural details.** Some of the specifics noted included:
 - a need for orientation materials or checklists from the Cabinet
 - advice on how best to allocate time and arrange the charge conference and clergy interview schedules
 - how best to get organized and develop needed systems
 - and how to deal with complaints
- Some also wished they had used this time to get a better **overview of the position and how different it is from what they had previously done.**

Before the Fall: Making the Most of the Summer Months [Audio Track 3 – 4:18]

This season covers the summer months prior to the start of Charge Conferences.

When our daughter began seminary, her school had an orientation retreat for new students. The name of the retreat used a theological play on words. It was called “Before the Fall.”

We have borrowed this phrase to describe the first weeks and months of a new superintendent’s term. Because once the fall comes and charge conferences begin, life is never the same again. It is important to make the most of the summer months.

Our survey asked if there were things new superintendents did **in this early period that were not helpful or did not work?** There were four things in this order:

- Trying to do too much and over committing one’s time
- Not asking enough questions or not consulting with other superintendents enough
- Giving too little attention to the office systems and administrative assistant
- And, not allowing time for rest and renewal

Of course, we were most anxious to know what they did **in these early weeks and months that was helpful and that they might recommend to other new superintendents.** A clear list emerged quickly.

The first was giving attention to prayer and spiritual life and setting healthy routines of exercise, rest, and time off.

Knowing that this new position was so different from what they had been doing; our survey had asked separately **what spiritual, professional, personal, or other patterns were most disrupted by your transition to this new role?** Two were named — their spiritual practices and family life. Many reported that their patterns of

spiritual practices of Bible study and prayer, as well as family patterns, had been so tied to other daily and weekly patterns as a pastor that it was difficult to maintain those patterns when everything else was so different.

Many reported that the most important thing they did in the early months was establishing daily spiritual routines. They found they had to set their own boundaries in this new role. Finding time for prayer, exercise, rest, and family became more and more a challenge so the boundaries and routines became essential. Taking a vacation before charge conferences started helped some go into the busy season more rested.

Second, using the time to talk with the clergy and laity of the district. Many quickly met with groupings of pastors. Some did the same with the lay leadership of the congregations. Some met with SPRC chairs while others held Listening Sessions. Some visited pastors that the previous DS had identified as having problems in their congregations. A few actually visited all the churches. One did so and asked these three questions: 1) What is happening here in ministry that is exciting? 2) Given your present circumstances, what do you believe God wants you to do? 3) What do you expect from your DS?

The third recommendation was talking with other current and former superintendents. Many new superintendents regularly consulted other superintendents for their advice in the early months to great benefit.

Using the “time before the fall” to your best advantage is an important way to lay the foundation of a successful superintendency.

Making the Rounds: The Charge Conference Season [Audio Track 4 – 6:13]

After the new superintendents had completed their first round of Charge Conferences, we asked them to look back on the experience and reflect on what they wished they had done, learned, or asked before beginning Charge Conferences.

The greatest response had to do with **their own preparation** for the charge conferences and actions they wish they had taken before the conferences began.

Most wished they had given to the pastors and charges more complete directions about their expectations.

Those that did not schedule time with Staff-Parish Relations Committees in conjunction with the charge conferences tended to wish they had and those that met with the committees often found they had not been clear about the purpose of the gathering.

Some wished they had insisted that more laity, and especially youth, be involved in presentations at the conferences.

Some felt they had neglected to study the church files adequately while others did not start out with adequate directions to the churches or correct time estimates for travel.

Some were not prepared for difficulties they had not anticipated such as: anger at ‘The Conference’ that they experienced in some situations and churches; and feeling, in other places, that churches felt threatened by having cluster charge conferences.

The next area they wished they had given more attention prior to beginning Charge Conferences had to do with **the pastor’s role and the pastor’s preparation**. Most wished they had reminded pastors that *they* are responsible for the quality of the charge conference. Many wished they had insisted that the pastors ensure that the nominations were in order. It was clear that some pastors, particularly part-time pastors, needed more

guidance. An outline and time limit would have helped many of the pastors regarding their own reports. Real weaknesses were found in planning for the future, having all reports completed, and having salary worksheets complete and correct. And, if pastors plan to use multimedia, they should be sure that it is well done and works.

The next thing new superintendents wished they had done differently had to do with the **scheduling of the charge conferences**. Many wished they had started them earlier in the fall. Some wished they had scheduled more on the weekends, including Saturdays, and fewer on weekday evenings. Some regretted allowing so many date changes.

Many superintendents wished they had done things differently in terms of **the format of the conferences**. Many wished they had put them more in a worship format. Others wished they had limited their questions to a few while others would have encouraged more interactive and participatory charge conferences.

The Lewis Center also asked about the ways their perceptions of their districts had changed based on their first round of Charge Conferences. There were two dominant responses.

First, the superintendents said their first round of charge conferences had given them a greater **understanding of the challenges and struggles** of various charges and pastors. They could tell which churches are doing well, which need help, and which pastors are providing good leadership. One superintendent put it this way: “Before the conferences, my perceptions were not very informed but now they are.” They talked about getting a more realistic picture of the health of each congregation and being able to form their own opinions without being limited to only the pastor’s assessment.

Second, the superintendents said the Charge Conference experience left them more **encouraged**. “There is much more vitality in the churches than I anticipated,” said one superintendent. The United Methodist Church continues to have a significant presence in most communities, many reported. A number were pleased to see small rural circuits doing effective evangelism and mission. “The churches are much healthier than I had been led to believe,” was one observation.

Finally, the new superintendents were invited to offer their best Charge Conference suggestions and recommendations for other superintendents.

- Their first suggestion was to insist that Charge Conference reports are turned in before the conference.
- Second, they suggested that the focus of the first round of charge conferences should be on getting to know the people and getting to be known by the people.
- Third, they suggested having a consistent question or set of questions to ask at each conference.
- Finally, they recommended focusing on a celebration of ministries and keeping everything positive.

It Always Seemed So Simple Before: The Appointment-Making Season [Audio Track 5 – 9:50]

New superintendents approached their first season of appointment making with a combination of excitement and caution. As pastors they had thought about the process for years and now they were intimately involved in decisions with far ranging consequences for congregations, pastors, and pastors’ families.

In preparing for their first round of appointment making, the new superintendents followed three general practices. They

- Met with pastors to discuss appointments
- Met with Staff-Parish Relations Committees or the committee chairs to discuss appointments, and
- Studied information on churches and pastors desiring a change

In looking back on their appointment making experience in the first year, there were three things they said they wished they had done.

The most common thing they wished they had done was to **prepare better**. Areas needing more preparation included more familiarity with the details of pastors' compensation packages, learning more about clergy they had not known previously, anticipating changes and thinking through possible appointment "runs" beyond just one appointment at a time, and failing to take account of the amount of time required to change charge configurations.

The next category they wish they had done differently had to do with the **difficulty of filling smaller churches**. As one superintendent put it, "I did not realize that it was almost completely on me to find and place pastoral leadership in small churches." Many superintendents realized too late that they needed to recruit lay speakers or retired clergy. In looking back, they found that they would have been in a much better position to fill these small churches if they had spent the first six months getting to know the lay speakers and retired clergy in the district.

The third learning from their first appointments round was that they should have **given more attention to the cabinet process itself**. Most had a chance to observe the appointment process before taking office, but they wished they had asked the other superintendents to talk about the unspoken assumptions and rules of the process. Some of the questions they wish they had asked of their colleagues included: What assumptions are there about prerogatives around churches and clergy in one's own district? Are there assumptions about the order in which appointments are made? What are the ground rules about the role of senior pastors in the appointment of associates? What assumptions, if any, are there about what size of salary increases or reductions are appropriate?

The new superintendents also identified a number of things that **went well in the appointment making process**.

They felt the cabinet followed a **careful discernment process** in making appointments. They experienced a real concern by all superintendents for making the best appointment for all the churches, not just those in their own districts. The process was prayerful and every effort was made to do the best for both the churches and pastors.

They also experienced a **collegial spirit in the cabinet's work**. Communication went well, working relationships were established so the cabinet could work as a team, and there was respect and collegiality throughout the process.

All in all, the superintendents felt that **good appointments were made** even in their first year and that the appointments were received well by the churches and pastors.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the new superintendents did identify some other things that **did not go as well**.

A number ran into **difficulty in getting pastors to move**. In some cases it was because a pastor had been at a place for a long time and in others it was because the pastors were appointed to lower salary churches. Special limitations expressed by the pastors who either needed to move or who wanted to move were especially hard. Some superintendents found real questioning of the authority of the bishop and cabinet by pastors and spouses, and both churches and pastors that did not seem to understand the process. Even in the best of situations, the challenges of two employment families put strains on what is possible.

While superintendents felt good about the **cabinet process**, there were problems that arose. Some reported appointments that seemed forced rather than taking the time to listen to one another. Some worried about how candid some colleagues were in telling them about pastors, especially when there were efforts to send a disproportionate number of ineffective pastors to the districts of new superintendents.

They discovered the **unrealistic expectations by some clergy**. “Cranky clergy,” as one superintendent put it, “expecting all of their location, situation, and salary demands to be met” do not understand the real options available. Many clergy have higher expectations than are realistic, or do not want to live in most of the areas of the conference, some superintendents reported.

And, as one might expect, having to **place ineffective clergy** was difficult. One superintendent put it this way: There were “Too many ineffective clergy on the table and not enough really good leadership to go around.”

The New Superintendents were also asked what they would do differently in making appointments the next year based on their experience.

Most indicated a desire to **get to know the churches and pastors better**. They would try to get a better understanding of the gifts for those clergy who are on the move list and try to develop a greater knowledge of the spirit of the churches. They indicated that they would have more conversations with pastors and churches and monitor and document the effectiveness of pastors. Some indicated they wanted to get clearer about the age of pastors and when they anticipated retiring. A practice suggested by a number of superintendents was going to the churches of pastors up to move to hear them preach.

They also said they would communicate more with Staff Parish Relations Committees. Everyone knows there can never be too much communication and the new superintendents were clear that they needed to speak personally to pastors and staff-parish chairs where they felt that ambiguous messages were being conveyed. All parties need to be clear about their desires and intentions. Several superintendents learned that when charge realignment is anticipated that the communication process needs to begin much sooner than they had previously thought. Some believed that meeting with the staff-parish committees in the fall in connection with Charge Conference would give them clues about what to expect regarding appointments.

In addition to communicating more, they said **the nature of the communication needs to be strategic and proactive**. Some superintendents felt they disclosed too much about options for clergy and thus set them up for disappointment. “I will not share as quickly churches that I feel might be open as I did this year,” remarked one superintendent. Some superintendents felt they needed in the next year to come to the cabinet with specific ideas for certain churches and to be more assertive in the process.

Another theme was **the need to reinforce itinerancy**. For some this means reminding pastors how the United Methodist system works. For others it includes having a 'reality' conversation about not being able to deliver everything pastors want so the pastors need to share their top priority such as salary, or location, or church size.

Findings and Recommendations [Audio Track 6 – 5:00]

In this segment, I would like to share some of the overall findings and recommendations from our research. Let's begin with the findings:

- First, survey respondents identified their most important activities. Superintendents discovered quickly that their responsibilities were much broader and multi--faceted than they had ever imagined. They welcomed a chance after one year to reflect on what in their work is most crucial for the future of the church knowing that they must set priorities or others will set priorities for them by default. The superintendents identified four tasks as most crucial for their ministry as a superintendent. They were:
 - building trust and relationships,
 - making good appointments,

- being present and visible, and
 - promoting clergy effectiveness and accountability.
- Next, the new superintendents identified several **competencies as most needed in their new role**. These include skill in coaching congregations toward growth and renewal, conflict management skills, and supervision skills.
 - Also, the superintendents named the **most pressing issues in their districts** as making disciples, congregational revitalization, and leadership development.
 - Additionally, they viewed **the greatest opportunities in their districts** as making disciples, clergy growth and development, and congregational revitalization.
 - Finally, the superintendents were asked at the end of their first year **if they could go back** to when they were asked to be a superintendent, would they still welcome the appointment? Virtually all said they would. This is indeed encouraging.

We now turn to recommendations. The following overall recommendations grow out of this research.

- **First, a superintendent's primary focus should be effective pastoral leadership.** No superintendent can make up for poor local leadership. Superintendents need to work daily to improve their district's pastoral leadership, not only through new appointments, but by retraining pastors and encouraging the truly ineffective to retire or exit the system.
- **Second, making disciples should be the key goal.** New superintendents identified making disciples, congregational revitalization, and leadership development as the three most pressing needs of their districts. Rather than seeing three separate concerns, making disciples can drive congregational revitalization and leadership efforts.
- **Third, mission energy should be harnessed to make disciples.** Since energy around mission engagement is the greatest strength in the districts, it is imperative to build on this for making disciples.
- **Fourth, adequate training and orientation should be provided for new superintendents.** Their key new skill needs are in coaching, conflict, and supervision. In addition, conferences should provide an orientation to include cabinet policies and procedures; conference policies, especially those pertaining to health insurance and pensions; and the candidacy process.
- **Next, new superintendents should schedule Sabbath time.** New superintendents need to build in Sabbath time both before their move and during the summer before the charge conference season. Few are prepared for the exhausting demands of the fall.
- **Also, new superintendents should prepare more for charge conferences.** Superintendents felt more preparation would have improved their first round of charge conferences.
- **Finally, new superintendents should prepare more for appointment making.** Most superintendents spent much time preparing to make appointments, yet realized later they should have done more. Finding pastors for very small membership churches, often falling solely to the superintendent, had not been a concern soon enough for many.

