Planning and Implementing Successful Pastoral Succession
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Abstract
The senior pastoral ministry serves as the visionary catalyst for the local church congregation. The pastor’s role is defined by cultural, ethnic, and theological traditions that often determine how the pastor plants a church, leads a people and transitions once the pastoral assignment is completing. Neither responsibility is easy. Each carries a complexity that warrants study and evaluation of how to implement best practices. However, the matter of pastoral succession brings concerns, sensitivities, and challenges that are unique within any discussion of ministerial success. Center of Praise Ministries, Sacramento, California is an example of what paradigms, challenges, and mores that must be addressed in facilitating healthy transition. A local must church must ask, Why a pastoral succession plan? How long is too long? How does one assess and develop successive leadership? Intentional and strategic pastoral succession planning provides a means by which church either develop healthy constructs that facilitate the possibilities of growth and expansion.

“You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as soldier. And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. The hard-working farmer must be first to partake of the
The apostle provides careful instruction to his pastoral apprentice, noting that the gospel and the testimony of Jesus Christ must continue beyond him imminent physical departure. It would appear that Paul embraces the idea that his ministerial assignment includes that of assuring a continuity and perpetuation of the Church’s teachings. Paul shares directives with Timothy that addresses the need for faithfulness, sustainability, and impartation. This idea was noted in the heart of Jesus Christ as he exhorted the importance of disciples making other disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). The emphasis of faithfulness to the truth constitutes effective and true pastoral succession. The least of Paul’s concern is that of any materialistic, ego-sustaining, or societal status posturing. He acknowledges that there are others beyond himself that play an integral part in presenting the message of the Kingdom to the world. Yet, he also presents analogies that reflect the process of implementing succession infrastructure and culture. Three characterizations are shared; the military soldier, the athlete, and the farmer. I submit that these three give insight to facilitating biblical pastoral succession.

**Three Characteristics of Succession**

Paul shares with young Timothy that the outgrowth of faithfulness, is to understand the warfare dynamic of ministry as it relates to declaring the principles of God’s Word. It should never be underestimated the threat that is posed when multiplying spiritual leadership. The encouragement is found in Paul’s reference to a being a “good soldier.” A good soldier must not be preoccupied with the hardships of life or that which is accompanied with the church. Make no
mistake, ministry is difficult. Therefore, an understudy or one who assumes leadership within the footsteps of a predecessor must be willing to assume the discipline of a soldier that is responsive to honoring the authority of Jesus Christ and honoring the legacy of the preceding pastor.

Second, this example conveys the importance of the predecessor assuming a positioning of submission to the One who has called us to serve. He Who has called those that serve has the authority to reassign leadership as He so desires. The objective of all within healthy pastoral calling is to serve the Lord at His pleasure.

The second analogy presented in the text is that of the athlete. The apostle shares that the objective of a great success is that of competing according to the rules. The crown affirming successful participation is assumed by the one that understands the processes that bring victorious outcomes and discernment of what may facilitate disqualification. The healthy leader will grasp the larger context of stewardship and mentorship within the scope of pastoral transitioning. His or her concern for the congregation and his or her own physical well being will engage ideas of teamwork and the passing of the baton to the next team member. Anything less than a team focus will malign and undermine the ability for churches to grow and expand.

Paul’s third analogy is that of the farmer. A pastor is challenged to embrace the stewardship mantle of the farmer. The farmer is given the responsibility to sow towards a future harvest. A wise farmer will understand that the crop of the harvest is to be shared beyond his or herself. Yet, the blessing of being one that participates in the crop harvest is evident as the preceding pastor observes the continuation of salvations, baptisms, and discipleship through the next pastoral leader. Again, the measure of successful pastoral leadership is not facilitated through retention of the church parsonage or retirement pension. Rather, the measure of success
is the carefully implemented pastoral succession that invokes the training models presented through the characteristics found in a good soldier, an athlete, and farmer. The opportunity to see the church expand and grow is greatly enhanced through a deliberate and well planned process.

**What Does Healthy Succession Involve?**

Robert W. Strong recently conducted a study that discovered that there are three primary ways that pastoral transition takes place: pastoral appointment, pastoral or governing board recommendations, a search committee. He concluded that the current condition of a ministry determines which methodology will be most effective. He further concluded that pastoral appointment and board recommendation was the more effective concept rather than a search committee process. Therefore, a solid succession plan provided the best chance for fruitful pastoral transition.

A true succession plan may be defined as a detailed written plan that is ratified by the highest leadership of the local and implemented by the church accomplish a smooth transition from one pastor to another. Such a plan may be initiated by the senior pastor and/or a group designated within the church to assist the pastor with polity matters. Certainly the role and interface of the denominational structure if applicable is required to aid the plan. The overall governing structure of the church presents the variables that determine to what extent the plan may be presented. The objective would be at minimum to have the discussion of what plan would be implemented in the event of the immediate removal of the senior pastor or an anticipated departure. Emphasis is on presenting a plan in writing to encourage clarity,
continuity, and presenting as a template for future internal (within the local church) or external (other congregations) usage.

A succession plan should be founded upon strong emphasis of biblical guidance. Respected pastor Walter August vehemently contests the use of search committees in the process of selecting a pastor. He purports, “When a pastor dies suddenly, 80% of search committees choose the wrong pastor.” He draws this conclusion based on his understanding of Scripture, his personal experience with other pastors, and this conviction that a successor should be appointed by the current pastor. Gerald Gillaspie, a denominational leader, aligns with this biblical stance from a denominational view. “The Bible also does not give us any indication of an authoritative council to delegate available pastors to empty pulpits.” Ideally there should be on the job training and observation provided within an effective succession planning process.

Second, a pastoral succession plan will greatly benefit with the input and support of the senior pastor. The pastor should have an opportunity to serve in conversation, assessment, and selection of a succeeding candidate. This is particularly true if the pastor has served the congregation well and the church is in a relatively healthy position. In the case of a long serving leader, the respect and honor given him will in many instances posture the new pastor to be received well if it is perceived the predecessor has given support and blessing to the candidacy process. Many would argue that the Apostle Paul’s affirmation of Timothy provided a means by which Timothy could be received within the various congregations that he served. Therefore, the predecessor pastor provides both spiritual and emotional guidance towards a matter that can be very difficult for a church.
Church-wide team participation is critical for the success of a true pastoral succession. Frank discussion should be held with key leaders within the congregation and possibly with the church congregation itself; particularly, if the church is structured through congregationally governed systems. These discussions should be held beyond the context of crisis. The objective would be to encourage the “what if” scenario as a means of setting strategies that serve as contingency plans at minimum and ultimately setting a healthy course of ministry continuance.

Third, a dynamic pastoral succession plan must be presented as a positive action versus a sad occasion. The emotional baggage associated with change is inevitable. Although change is inevitable, the level of uncertainty that accompanies change may be minimized by effective planning. A good transition plan helps churches see clearly through the process of change. There should be such an intentional approach to the subject that the element of fear is secondary to more pragmatic concerns, such as acquiring suitable succession candidates and creating an environment within the church that is principle versus personality focused. The fact remains, if the pastor is no longer able to serve for any reason, there remains a need for a systematic, well developed plan of pastoral replacement. The more deliberate the discussion of a ministry’s future, the more deliberate action will be referenced. A positive approach with celebration of what has been accomplished under the preceding leader will give excitement for what possibilities await as a church follows fresh and innovative concepts presented under leadership succession. Future focused leaders with fresh perspective allow a church to reignite core values and the commitment to expand to greater outreach and church growth.

A deliberate succession pastoral succession plan should be willing to explore new territory that moves beyond the boundaries of tradition, church culture, and ethnic/cultural
constructs. There are some traditions that give thought to the belief that a senior pastor should serve until death. This outcome is often expedited by the demands placed upon pastors within such belief systems. The church that grasp the importance of continuity will observe the often contentious and negative aspects that are often associated and heightened where there are elements of uncertainty. One must concentrate on merely what has been in the past. There must be a casting forth of visionary perspective of what God desires to reveal in the future of both the ministry of the predecessor and the ministry of the church under the successor.

The well implemented pastoral succession plan must be reproducible. Each point of succession development should be well documented (the good, the bad, and the ugly). Often ministry leaders attempt to only convey the concepts that worked well. There is at times a self-serving perspective that presents ideologies as being flawless. Such conveyance is both disingenuous and misleading. Transition can be difficult, heart wrenching, and carry an element of tension as the process evolves. The transparency and vulnerability of the transitioning team provides a model that is replicable and appreciated by those that seek to experience the benefit of healthy planning and pastoral placement.

**Components of Succession Plan Development**

A successful pastoral succession plan is facilitated through criteria that are comprehensive and evaluative throughout the entire process of transition. Such processes are designed to be flexible and implemented over a period of time determined by the leadership team. Second, the criteria may be customized around various denominational perspectives or core values that are relevant to the church of placement. Therefore, they are generalized within
this presentation as to allow concepts regarding the discussion of leadership succession to flow beyond rigid systems that may not address various ministry settings.

Assessment

Every succession model must first begin with the idea of what is desired with a pastoral candidate. This begins with the assessment criteria. The assessment focus pin points such thoughts as to the age, family life, spiritual background, theological training, and pastoral ambitions. Although this time period may begin with general observation, the assessment phase can be very detailed and should be given extensive attention to best determine candidates of consideration. Some congregations have broadened this phase to include such inquiries as professional psychosocial screenings and financial profiles. Many congregational leaders have resorted to extensive criminal background checks and verification of educational transcripts. Various denominational groups and networks offer pastoral “bootcamps.” These intensive gatherings are designed to present evaluative guidelines to potential pastoral candidates. Often they are developed with the emphasis of new church planters. However, this may also serve as a resourcing pool for those desiring to lead existing ministries. The more thorough the assessment, the better opportunities are given to evaluate strong candidates of consideration.

Affirmation

The criteria of affirmation focuses on the role of the predecessor and/or leadership team relying on the ministry of the Holy Spirit to guide in the selection of a candidate and communicating the belief that there is a plan at work within the leadership continuance
within the church. Such affirmation draws from the exhaustive requirements presented within the assessment phase. This aligns with Paul’s instruction to Timothy, “Lay hands on no man suddenly” (1 Timothy 5:2) There can be no over emphasis of the fact that this period of affirmation requires great trust on the part of the church and that of the pastoral candidate. It is the period in which it may be clearly stated, “We believe that God is doing something here.” The predecessor must also be affirmed within the desire to transition leadership. He must receive continual feedback that to plan transition is not only healthy but, it is fully aligned with God’s desire to see the Church grow and to systematically raise godly leaders.

Confirmation

This phase assumes that the candidate for succession has been vetted through thorough assessment and there is clear affirmation provided to the succession construct. Again, though concrete elements of evaluation are foundational within these procedures, the ministry of the Holy Spirit serves as the key element in providing God’s plan for the church. The account of Simeon, Lucious, Manaem, Paul and Barnabus in Acts 13, shares example of the interactive work of the Holy Spirit with ministry leadership using the confirmation criteria. Confirmation uses various aspects of the candidates life, the predecessor, and the church as a means of observing the intersecting and prophetic elements that demonstrate God’s handiwork in the life of His people. It becomes apparent that God chooses to confirm His plans through the interconnected lives of people.
Communication

The communication phase of the succession plan should give specific timeline to the process of preparing and presenting the plan church-wide. A timeframe should take into consideration the necessary discussions, observations, and evaluations required to assure a good placement. It should include verbal, written, and modeled elements of informing those that initiate, interface, or are impacted by the anticipated transition. Communication will become increasingly important as the period of transition draws closer. Moore shares his account of pastoral succession and transition as he was leaving a ministry he planted in Southern California to begin a church plant in Hawaii. “The struggle seemed harder during those final months. I didn’t want to leave security, notoriety, good friends, and all that make home lovely. I began to loathe the insecurity, obscurity and uncertainty of life in another state.”\(^1\) The human perspectives will only be realigned with a clearly communicated vision. The principle will guide the posture assumed by the succession team. The church will be able to observe the inevitable tension that facilitates change, but the church will also observe a deliberate course of action that focuses on the objective presented. Last, communication involves the various methodologies incorporated with sharing the development and updates of the succession transition. This may include congregational meetings, social media, letters, or even the predecessor sharing the preaching schedule with the succeeding pastor.

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Edification

The Edification phase brings emphasis to the importance of building relationship between the predecessor and successor. This cannot be underestimated or minimized. The succeeding leader will only be able to experience healthy transition if the preceding pastor is willing to embrace and build up the process. The simple statement, “I am proud of you and what I see the Lord doing in your life and ministry,” carries much wait and encouragement to those that are called to lead. This is particularly true in the situation where a processor has served a long period of time within a local church. Emmy nominated studio analyst and winning coach Tony Dungy shares, “Encouragement is the fuel that powers our efforts to engage, educate, and equip. Nothing does more to lubricated the rough spots than a good dose of encouragement.” The predecessor must assume the role of being the single-most encourager to only the new leader, but to the process overall. The modeling of encouragement will provide enormous support during the planning and also during the post-transitional period.

Ratification

There are many variables regarding the ratification process of selecting and placing a new pastor. This is due largely in part to the various governance guidelines of churches. Denominational churches will refer to the ecclesiastical guidelines presented by the governing denomination. There are churches that rely upon the pastor or the pastoral search committee to make a recommendation. Once there has been a formal

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recommendation then pastoral candidate is presented to the congregation for either a vote or ratification presentation.

Celebration

The period of celebration denotes that a thorough well planned assessment has been implemented. The assessment, affirmation, confirmation, communication, edification, and ratification has presented a succession candidate that has been well vested and the predecessor, the church, and the successor can now celebrate God’s provision to the congregation. Such celebration should be inclusive of celebrating the departing pastor appropriately and generously. The emotion of letting go of one leader should be balanced with the excitement of receiving the new pastor. This celebration phase may involve sending the predecessor and spouse on a trip, financially honoring the pastor, or a banquet held at the conclusion of the pastor’s ministry tenure. A community-leaders reception could be held to welcome the new pastor and spouse to the faith community as a new senior leader among the community clergy. Welcome letters may be solicited from civic leader, businesses, fellow clergy, and the congregational members. These same individuals may also express their gratitude to the predecessor. The goal is to provide honor to pastors that have led or it is anticipated that they will lead well (1Timothy 5:17-22).

Then There Was No Plan at All

The benefit of having a well defined pastoral succession plan is often overlooked until tragic events warrant careful reconsideration. A 1500 member congregation in Sacramento,
California experienced the challenge of not having a plan recently. During a period of tremendous growth and ministry expansion, the fifty-four year old senior pastor passed away suddenly of a massive heart attack, leaving the congregation without any idea of who would lead the congregation. Although, there was a week of commendable coverage and memorializing of his passing, the realities of there being no contingency plan in place quickly consumed the focus of the church leadership. Another global mission leader, age fifty-four also recently passed away, leaving the global mission organization he founded without any clear directive to what should happen if he were no longer able to serve. Sadly, the board of directors for the mission group had to dissolve the organization due to the fact that there was no evident successor to lead the ministry. In both instances the absence of a successor left both groups in a emotional and logistical whirlwind.

**Five Things That Can Derail a Healthy Succession Plan**

There are five elements that can hinder the facilitation of a well orchestrated pastoral succession plan. They are as follows:

1. Senior Pastor stays in position too long
2. Limited selection pool of healthy pastoral leaders
3. An unhealthy or traumatized congregation due to moral failure or financial mishandling within a congregation.
4. Denominational structure does not support succession planning processes within the local church level (e.g. Bishop reassigns current pastoral leadership and appoints new pastors)
5. The financial resources of the local church are not designed to provide needed support for the predecessor that is retiring or unable to serve for other viable reasons.
The Center of Praise Story

The idea that there be a strategic succession plan for the senior pastor role at the Center of Praise Ministries, Sacramento, California has been forged with a believe that, “Success without a Successor is failure.” The Center of Praise has reached a place of respectability, stability, and communal strength under a pastoral leadership of 25 years. There are set plans to continuing enriching the community with disciple-making initiatives; including church planting from within the mother congregation.

The Center of Praise Ministries was planted in 1989 as a nondenominational church with an emphasis of merging biblical foundation and social advocacy. The congregations demographic is that of 70% African American, 25% Anglo, and 5% other ethnic groups. The church is located in the heart of Midtown Sacramento. The area continues to experience both a social and economic renaissance as the area is expanding beyond the years of economic recession. Three weekend worship celebrations are held, hosting over 3300 people. The current senior pastor is also the founding pastor. The congregation is pastor led and advisory council (board) governed. The congregants are empowered to ratify major decisions of the Advisory Council. Specifically, matters of pastoral selection and land acquisition are presented to the church congregation for final ratification and approval.

In the summer of 2010 the senior pastor discussed with various the leaders the need to begin a pastoral succession plan as a means of securing the well-being of the church’s future. In April of 2012 the senior pastor met a young 36 year old church planter who had planted a small congregation two years earlier. During the course of a brief conversation the senior pastor exchanged contact information and provided a prayer of encouragement to the young leader. One
month later the senior pastor received a phone call from the man requesting an acquaintance meeting. It was during the initial conversation that the younger pastor asked if the senior pastor would provide support to him as a mentor. The subsequent meetings over the next several months served as a time of encouragement and prayer support for the church planter. Six months later during a period of closing prayer the senior pastor discerned that there was potentially a deeper purpose in the two meeting. During that time the senior pastor asked would the young man prayerfully consider beginning a process of consideration as the successor of the pastoral role at the Center of Praise. The church planter conferred with his wife and agreed to begin the process of consideration. The church planter was asked to share a sermon for the congregation at one of the evening services. It was this particular setting that drew confirmation from four elders of the congregation who shared that the Holy Spirit had led them to believe that the young pastor should be considered as successor of the senior pastor. This period of confirmation allowed the process to move forward with a comprehensive assessment. It should be noted that the elders that gave confirmation provided feedback to the senior pastor unbeknownst to one another. Once the confirmation was provided the process of assessment was fully engaged.

The senior pastor requested that staff provide a full background check, ministry and employment background, and educational review. During this time the senior pastor and young mentee continued to meet weekly for periods of affirmation and edification. Both viewed these week 1-2 hours as critical opportunities to discuss interpersonal matters and concerns. These meetings, though informal, were given top priority for the purpose of continuing the assessment phase and providing opportunities of trust building. Also, key staff was given an opportunity to meet with the candidate, aside from the senior pastor, to inquire and provide their personal
feedback regarding the qualifications of pastor. The senior pastor collaborated extensively with the staff members and elders as a means of encouraging transparency and openness within the discussions. The candidate was provided a role description of both an pastoral assistant and that of a senior pastor. Second, the pastoral candidate was provided a detailed timeline, outlining the scope and timeline of the evaluative and transitioning process. To provide daily observation, the church planter was asked to relinquish his pastoral duties of his church plant and was asked to become the assistant pastor of Center of Praise Ministries. Again, the idea was to fully provide opportunities by which the pastor could work alongside the senior pastor and experience and acknowledge the culture of the church and the trends of the predecessor.

The assessment period proved to be very successful, allowing the church leadership to begin communicating the intentional planned succession. Methods of communication involved, sharing preaching duties, placing the picture of the young pastor and his spouse on any materials in which the senior pastor and spouse were presented in representation of the church (i.e. church bulletin, website, and all church advertisement). The senior pastor began to make verbal reference of the young man as a means of acquainting the congregation with him. The senior pastor also began to share with other fellow clergy the planned succession. This was done at a regional gathering of pastors, with the desire that the city pastors would offer prayer support through the transition.

During the period of communicating to others the deliberate approach to succession planning, the senior pastor and pastor of consideration, sought to keep open discussion regarding the fears, the concerns, the excitement, the areas of intimidation, and what each anticipated
moving forward. This allowed both to be edified through mutual support and daily encouragement.

Currently, the succession plan is within its second of three year process. There have been great strides made to present the plan in a positive and educational fashion. Many have stated that it is uncharted territory. However, it is anticipated that the young pastor will be presented formally in one year for ratification by the congregation. After the formal ratification of the congregation a special celebration will commemorate the 25 year leadership of the predecessor. The preceding pastor will serve out the remainder of the calendar year and then a special installation service will be held. The predecessor will lead the installation and all of the elders will offer prayer, through the laying on of hands and words of encouragement to the newly installed pastor and his spouse. This event will be preceded with a community reception that will host church and civic leaders from throughout the region as they offer their congratulatory messages to the new pastor.

The outgoing pastor will leave for a designated period of 1-3 months. This absence is designed to encourage a bonding period with the new leader and also a time of reflection and refreshing for the former senior pastor. The plan is for the former pastor to return in the role of advocacy and support for the new senior pastor. The new leader will benefit from the role of his predecessor as private confidant and public fan. The conversation has been held verbally and an agreement will be presented in writing that the full intent of the outgoing senior pastor is to serve at the pleasure of the new pastor and the church advisory council. The church leader has been gracious to designate the title “founding pastor” to the outgoing senior pastor. The founding pastor will assist with weddings, funerals, and serve on the teaching team of the church. He will
also provide direct oversight to the capital giving campaign, designed eliminate the current property mortgages.

Conclusion

Every church will ultimately experience a form of succession. The question is not when, but how the succession is implemented. The desire to see the perpetuation of healthy ministry and leadership is driven equally by a definitive plan and presentation of constructs that provide strong support for both the predecessor the successor, and the served congregation. From a contemporary perspective this discussion of succession is new territory. However, there remains biblical precedent that affirms God’s heart for His Church to be well led. He yet provides shepherds that carry His heart for the people (Jeremiah 3:15). The deliberate planning and implementation of a healthy pastoral succession plan serves as an opportunity for the church to grow exponentially and through maturity. It models principles that transform congregations into healthy church ministries, advancing the Kingdom of God.