

Loving Them to the End

How a Pastor Begins Thinking about Pastoral Succession Planning

by J. Russell Crabtree

Pastoral succession planning is a process that develops a plan for replacing the current pastor and begins to implement that plan prior to the current pastor's departure. The purpose of pastoral succession planning is to enable a church to move forward into the next phase of its external mission and internal development with a new leader appropriate to those developmental tasks with a minimum of spiritual, programmatic, material, and people losses during the transition. This takes seriously the call of Jesus to not only "bear fruit", but to bear fruit "that will last." (John 15:16) In the current environment where church leaders often resist succession planning, a transitional "rot" sets in that seriously jeopardizes years of faithful and fruitful ministry.

Who is going to lead the church in developing a pastoral succession plan? If a church is going to successfully develop and implement a plan, it is essential that you, the Pastor provide the leadership that will encourage this to happen. You cannot expect your lay leaders to initiate this conversation; most of them do not know how to bring the topic up. Besides, they will be reluctant to say anything that will leave the impression that they want you to leave. Like every other important issue in the church the Pastor must lead. How do you begin?

1. First, you must become familiar with the elements of pastoral succession planning. Most pastors have had little or no training on this process. Instead, we have been steeped in what I call resignation management planning which is focused on how to react when the Pastor announces his or her resignation. Pastoral succession planning is much more strategic in nature. It focuses on building resiliency by engaging people in a thoughtful, prayerful, and intentional process. While pastoral succession planning is not rocket science, neither is it simply a matter of getting a *pastor faster*. It is a fundamentally different way of dealing with pastoral transitions and you will need to get yourself educated if you are going to lead others.
2. Make it a point to talk with other pastors who have developed and implemented a pastoral succession plan. There is a small but growing number of pioneering pastors who have ventured outside the resignation management box and have proven that pastoral succession planning works.
3. Initiate some general conversations on pastoral succession planning with your leaders. One of the reasons Carolyn Weese and I wrote *Elephant in the Boardroom* was to provide pastors with a resource that could help start the conversation. If you introduce the topic using a book, people can approach an uncomfortable issue by reacting to the book rather than to you.
4. Work with your leaders to develop a compelling, Biblically-based vision for the succession process, whenever it occurs. This does not need to be (and should not be) detailed. It should be a high-level snapshot of what the transition to a new leader will look like, what people will be doing, what they will be saying, how they will be thinking, feeling...and praying. One of the benefits of this exercise is that clarity around how you want the church to handle the transition to your successor will inform the kind of church you need to develop *now*.

5. Make sure that you are developing the Body under your care in a way that is consistent with your transition vision. Don't exhibit a leadership style in which you are the father figure of a large family and then expect the church in the transition to suddenly morph into a church with a high degree of bench strength and resilience. It won't.
6. Find the trusted members of your leadership team who may have developed skills in succession planning in other contexts. Remember, the church is behind many organizations in our country for which succession planning is standard practice. While talking about succession planning may sound strange to you, it is familiar to many of your leaders. Most large businesses would not dream of a leadership vacuum lasting one to two years while the search was on for a new leader. Time and time again, I have seen men and women with skills to offer the church in the area of succession planning whose gifts are totally dismissed by the simplistic assertion – "but the church is different."

This is part of a larger issue. My research shows that during a transition 30%-40% of a congregation indicates a willingness to help with transitional tasks and 15% indicates they are willing to give more money to help with the transition. Ironically this happens at a time when a secret search process involving only a few people on a search committee goes underground leaving everyone else with nothing to do. Developing a pastoral succession plan treats people like adults and gives them an opportunity to take responsibility for their own future.

7. If you are in a denominational system, begin talking to those with the power to permit an alternative transition process early on. In many cases, they will need to be educated about pastoral succession planning as well. They will need to be reassured that you are not merely using a different approach in order to surreptitiously stay in control of the church. This will require that you go before the Lord and purify your heart so that you have clarity on this as well.
8. As your departure date becomes clearer it will be important that you make sure that leaders have quality resources to assist them in the process. Key among these is a transition consultant who can provide guidance to them at a time when you will need to begin to practice a "disciplined absence". A transition consultant does not need to be a professional consultant. Many denominational systems provide volunteers who offer quality assistance at no charge beyond expenses. But it is important that references be obtained for any person that you select to work with your leaders whether they are paid or volunteer. Even if you are years away from a pastoral transition begin assembling a mental list of resources that might be helpful when that day comes.

Of course, that day always comes. When you are within two years of an anticipated transition, you will need to take further steps in the pastoral transition process which go beyond the scope of this article and are outlined in *The Elephant in the Boardroom*. Pastoral succession planning is not easy work. It is an act of discipleship, of following Jesus, who, in his own difficult transition out of leadership insured that the fruit of his own ministry would abide.