

A photograph of a person in profile, wearing a dark shirt, reading a book at a podium. The podium is made of clear acrylic and holds the book and a tablet. The background is blurred, showing other people in a church setting.

The Looming Pastoral Succession Crisis and Why It's Already Bad

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Of all the issues the church needs to deal with in the next ten years, succession is near the top of the list.

So many of the churches started in the 80s, 90s and early 2000s are led by (now) older leaders. A similar reality is also facing established churches who have had a leader in place for decades.

And while the succession wave has begun, it hasn't nearly peaked. Even so, where the transitions have started, I'm talking to a growing number of young leaders in their 20s and 30s and 40s who tell me privately that for the most part, the successions that are happening toggle between bad and disastrous. It's just not going well.

Usually, the leader stayed too long, lost passion years before they left, left things in far worse shape than he or she admits, inflated numbers to make themselves feel good, or is meddling and intervening constantly or all of the above. I know that's ugly and actually rather unChristian...but that's what I'm hearing.

As someone who navigated my own succession a few years ago when I turned 50, this issue is close to my heart. Many people told me I was stepping out of the Lead Pastor role into a Founding and Teaching Pastor role really early...that I had years left in the tank.

And yet the question that I began to obsess over (and I think every leader has to ask) is this: Is what started with me going to end with me?

The answer to that has to be a resounding no. What started with you should never end with you. Not when it comes to the church.

The mission is way bigger than you. And your goal should be to help it thrive long after you're gone.

An effective succession is so vital.

Ultimately, there's no success without succession. Your leadership isn't really that effective if things go downhill, collapse or become miserable when you leave.

In our case, I'm so grateful for the job that Jeff Brodie is doing as Lead Pastor of Connexus. The church was at its strongest yet when I handed things over to Jeff in 2015. It's even stronger and larger now under his leadership. We're experiencing significant growth again this year, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and I couldn't be happier.

Leaders, don't let what started with you end with you.

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So why is succession going so poorly for so many churches? Here's what I'm seeing, hearing and learning.

Many Leaders Stay Too Long...Way Too Long

Far too many pastors today are staying two seasons (or ten seasons) too long.

Their passion has faded. Their zeal has diminished. There are few fresh ideas, if any.

But they just keep hanging on.

Often, everyone can see their need to leave but them. And sadly, it's harming the mission.

The church isn't growing anymore. And they invent reasons as to why it's not—culture's changed. People are watching online. Things aren't the same anymore.

But they ignore the fact that there's a church across town that's blowing up with fresh, young leadership and a new approach.

I outline [7 signs you've peaked as a leader here](#), and [7 signs it's time to move on in this post](#).

I promise you if you've overstayed, the team around you are either leaving one by one or growing more frustrated daily.

Everyone's afraid to address the elephant in the room. No one has the courage to say;

"I don't know how to tell you this, but you've stayed past your expiry date. The bread is stale and the crust's getting moldy. It seems like everyone can see it except you. For the sake of the mission, will you move on?"

After all, pastor, you're not the mission. The mission is so much bigger than you."

I know I'm being a bit harsh, but as someone who has sat in that seat, I speak with a lot of conviction. And from what I'm seeing, many pastors are hanging on too long.

The church isn't your personal kingdom; it's God's. Steward it that way.

So why do too many church leaders stay too long? There are many reasons, but there are two reasons that seem to be surfacing again and again.

Too Many Pastors Stay Because They Can't Afford to Leave...

I've had dozens of conversations with staff, successors and board members who tell me that one of the main reasons their pastor has stayed 5, 10 or 15 years too long is financial.

That's heartbreaking, both for the pastor and for the church. Sure, sometimes mismanagement has been involved by the pastor. He or she made enough but just didn't save enough.

But often the financial crisis arose because the church honestly didn't pay that well and didn't set up a pension plan. Too few churches pay a living wage. I have empathy for that.

But does that mean you should hang on long after the thrill is gone to just collect a paycheck or wait for a modest pension to kick in? Absolutely not.

Look leaders: a money issue is a money issue. It doesn't need to become a succession issue.

Treat the financial issue as a financial issue. If that pastor needs more money for the future, negotiate a settlement. Create a pay-out or a pension and get on with things, or get the pastor financial counseling that will create an alternate plan.

And Many Pastors Stay Because Their Identity is In What They Do, Not Who They Are

One of the other reasons pastors hang on too long is because their identity is wrapped up in what they do.

When they look to the future, it's not nearly as exciting as the present or the past, so they hang on. Besides, what else can they do? They've been in ministry for decades.

Pastors, regardless of your age, your identity is not in what you do. It's found in who you are (in Christ).

Ironically, pastors who hang on to their job too long because they're afraid of the future will have less of a future than if they let go.

This tendency to vest your identity in what you do rather than in who you are also explains why so many pastors, even after they retire, often meddle and interfere in the new leader's ministry and end up becoming toxic. They can't let go of the steering wheel, and they make life miserable or even impossible for their successor.

God doesn't love you for what you do; he loves you for who you are. What you do isn't who you are.

This is where a board can step in, have an honest conversation with the leader and talk about all the options he or she faces for the future.

By making the financial conversation a financial one, and creating clear boundaries around the former pastor's role, church leadership teams can help leaders who need to go...go. Do it well and with dignity, and everyone wins.

If You're That Leader...

What do you do if you're a senior leader who's sensing that maybe you've stayed too long? Here's what you do: initiate the conversation. Pray about your future, but show the courage to tap your board chair or exec pastor on the shoulder one day and say "I think it's time for us to have the conversation about me stepping aside. I'm not sure I can afford to, I'm not sure I'm excited about it... but I think it's time."

Trust me, if it's not time, they'll tell you. But most often, they'll be so relieved you started the dialogue. If it goes well, everyone wins. What if it doesn't? Well, ask yourself: Would I rather face God and tell him, "God I tried to do the right thing." Or would you rather face God and tell him you were afraid and did the easy thing—you hung on way too long.

Leaders, God has a habit of catching us when we jump, and your future belongs to him. Run into it with joy and enthusiasm. Together with Christ and some friends, you'll figure it out.

Is it scary? Sure! Even when I stepped into the founding pastor a few years ago, it was a risk. We still had two kids in university. I took a pay cut. I had no idea what was on the other side. And sure, while I speak and write books and all that, I'm very aware that one day all of that could go away. It was faith and calling that moved me into the future. And I'm incredibly amazed that God has provided, more than I could ask or imagine.

If You're the Board or the Team

I know what some of you are thinking: we could leave this on our leader's desk and he would think it's about somebody else. Yep. I know. None of us wants to be the person who gets tapped on the shoulder one day. But especially in the church, the mission is too important to just let passionless or now-ineffective leaders lead.

So, start with prayer. Maybe then discuss this discretely with one or two other board members/ senior leaders and see if they agree. (Make those short, helpful and honoring conversations. Don't get toxic...) Talk about creating a financial plan and commit to letting your senior leader leave with his or her dignity in hand. Move them into the future by honoring the past. Address the issue, but look for the image of God inside your leader and treat it with respect and honor. Attack the problem, but never attack the person.

If you want to explore more of the conditions we set up at Connexus to create a healthy relationship between the church and me after my move to the Founding Pastor role, where it worked out great and where the tension points have been, listen to this interview Jeff Brodie and I did with Jeff Henderson on my leadership podcast (listen and read via the show notes or Episode 110 on iTunes).

I'm a little nervous about the conversations this post may trigger. But I think it's critical. Imagine a day when every leader thinks about succession long before it's needed. That goes for you too, leaders in their 20s and 30s...you won't be in your role forever. The church goes on forever. But your role won't.

Humility pushes other people into the spotlight. And the leader who raises up other leaders, ironically, makes themselves more valuable. So begin today with the end in mind. There's no success without succession. So start working on your succession now.

And for every leader who senses that maybe they've overstayed their leadership, just know that doing the right thing is never the easy thing. Just do the right thing. I can't imagine how much stronger the church will be in a decade if we get this succession thing right. So let's get it right.