



How to Thrive During a Pastoral Transition

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SUCCESSION
PLANNING

I was surprised when a pastor recently said to me, “I am responsible to lead my church while I am here. What happens after I am gone is not my issue.” After investing decades of his life into the people of his church and community, this pastor was okay with the thought that his church could experience a steep decline once he leaves.

Bestselling author Carey Nieuwhof writes, “As a former Lead Pastor committed to the next generation, here’s what I know: there’s no success without succession. If you build your church up only to have it fall apart or stumble after you leave, you’ll have neglected one of your most important responsibilities.”^[1] Carey believes, as do I, that, with effective planning, a church can become even stronger after succession than it was before.

A Major Setback

Pastoral transitions are inevitable for every church. Unfortunately, pastoral transitions often result in a major setback for the church – and it is becoming increasingly difficult for churches to bounce back. One recent study that included 125,000 members from more than 900 churches showed that the average percentage of church members thinking about exploring other churches jumped from one percent per year to four percent per year when their current pastor left.

The common practice of hiring an interim pastor increased this instability. The study found that by the time the church had an interim pastor for six months, the average percentage of church members who were thinking about exploring other churches tripled from four percent to twelve percent per year.^[2]

The researcher notes, “Worship attendance isn’t the only concern. By the time a church has had an interim pastor for six months or more, the typical church is reporting a net drop in revenue of seven percent per year. This is occurring at precisely the time when a church needs additional revenue to (a) fund a search process, (b) cover the costs of moving a pastor, (c) get the salary package of the pastor up-to-date, and (d) demonstrate to candidates that a church is on solid financial footing.”^[3] Few churches today can afford to experience such a loss in attendance, giving, or overall congregational momentum.

“Seamless Pastoral Transition” Defined

One practice that can mitigate such setbacks is Seamless Pastoral Transition. While this is not a new concept, it is an option that churches are choosing with increased frequency.

A Seamless Pastoral Transition is a leadership transition in which a pastoral vacancy is avoided by a planned overlap in service of the outgoing pastor and the incoming pastor.

The benefits of this transition model, when implemented with sound leadership principles, are significant:

- A Seamless Pastoral Transition ensures the continuity of a church's mission.
- A Seamless Pastoral Transition maintains a church's positive momentum.
- Just as important, a Seamless Pastoral Transition gives the congregation a priceless opportunity to observe godly leadership virtues in action as modeled by the outgoing and incoming pastors.

Defining Success

I recently interviewed several dozen church leaders (outgoing pastors, incoming pastors, and denominational executives) from a variety of traditions who were directly involved in a successful Seamless Pastoral Transition. The churches they led through these leadership transitions had one or more of the following characteristics:

- The churches were not in a significant crisis or in need of healing from a crisis.
- They were not struggling to find their identity or a renewed mission.
- They had a unique DNA and ministry in their community that congregation members did not want to risk being discontinued by an incoming pastor with a different vision.
- They were financially stable enough to pay both an outgoing pastor and incoming pastor during a period of time when they would both serve the church together, even if only for a few weeks.
- The outgoing pastor had served the congregation for many years and was loved and respected.

In general, these churches had “positive momentum” and were actively fulfilling their mission. While positive momentum cannot be defined merely in terms of attendance and/or giving, they definitely were not in steep decline or in danger of closing their doors.

It is important to note that the success of a Seamless Pastoral Transition is not measured by how well the church is doing in terms of attendance and giving years after the transition. There are too many variables involved with those metrics in any type of pastoral transition (i.e., a global pandemic). Nor is the word “seamless” interchangeable with the word “flawless.”

The measure of success for a Seamless Pastoral Transition is simply that the health and momentum of a church are not negatively impacted by an unnecessary gap in time between permanent pastors.

Pastoral Transition Imperatives

While prayer provided a firm foundation, the church leaders I interviewed all attributed their success, at least in part, to one or more of these Leadership Transition Imperatives:

1. **Share Leadership.** The outgoing pastor was committed to leadership development and meaningfully sharing leadership, especially with the incoming pastor.
2. **Pave the Way.** The outgoing pastor was committed to setting up the incoming pastor for success, including making strategic staff and board member changes before the transition.
3. **Model Humility.** The outgoing pastor took John the Baptist's "He must increase and I must decrease" approach. Both the outgoing and incoming pastor were committed to publicly and privately honoring one another before and after the transition.

The Critical Question

There is a critical question that every leader must ask: "Am I responsible for what happens after I leave my leadership role?" Moses, who was involved in the most well documented leadership transition found in scripture, would have answered that question in the affirmative. He could not guarantee what would happen to the nation of Israel after his death, but he could make sure that the people were left with a proven, effective leader.

It is interesting to note that seamless leadership transition was a deliberate choice on the part of Moses. He chose Joshua to take over the leadership of Israel in a transition that would involve no gap in time between the leaders. Joshua's leadership began the moment Moses' leadership ended. Moses clearly believed that a seamless leadership transition was God's will and in the best interests of God's people.

William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird point out a powerful truth: "Few (pastors) are eager to admit that their time with their present church will one day end. Planning for that day of succession may be the biggest leadership task a leader and church will ever face. It may also be the most important."^[4]

If you agree, then diligently planning a Seamless Pastoral Transition may be the best way that you can ensure that your church will continue to effectively fulfill its mission after your tenure as pastor.

Footnotes:

1 Lee Kricher, *Seamless Pastoral Transition: 3 Imperatives – 6 Pitfalls* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2022), vii.

2 J. Russel Crabtree, *Transition Apparitions: Why Much of What We Know About Pastoral Transitions is Wrong* (St. Louis: Magi Press, 2015), 46.

3 Crabtree, *Transition Apparitions*, 47.

[1] William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird, *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 9.