

Appendix D

The Value of Succession Planning in the Church

By Kevin Beery

THE CURRENT SITUATION OF THE CHURCH AS REGARDS SUCCESSION PLANNING

The senior pastor of a several-hundred member church in the Midwest dies of a heart attack. A youth pastor of a suburban Southern California church commits sexual indiscretion. The children's pastor of a megachurch in Florida accepts an invitation to the district office. The faithful church administrator of a thriving church in the Northwest Ministry Network reaches retirement age. What do these events have in common? They challenge church leadership when looking for a replacement for the open position. Church leadership must do what it can to ensure a smooth transition. In most cases the transition is anything but smooth (Godevenos 2002).

If the open position is the senior pastor's position, the generally accepted process is fairly well understood. The board sets up a pulpit committee, often including members of the board. The board consults district leadership. The church accepts applications for those seeking a senior pastor position. Some will have been senior pastors elsewhere, for others it will be their first time. This whole process is extremely taxing for the church leadership and also for the members who often have no experience with matters of succession (Charan 2005). The church is in turmoil as it deals with the sudden changes and at the same time make plans for the future. It is sound advice not to engage in dating while grieving a divorce, or the loss of a spouse to death. Yet this is what regularly happens in churches across America. A sudden change in leadership creates a mad scramble, and long-term decisions that should be made with much planning and prayer are made under the most trying circumstances.

DEFINITION OF AND NEED FOR SUCCESSION PLANNING

Is there another option? Yes. We call the alternative to a harried search and selection made under duress succession planning. Very simply, it involves making decisions about the church's continued need for leadership *before* a leadership crisis occurs (Charan 2005). Every church without a succession plan needs to take immediate steps to implement one (Rothwell 2005).

It is of primary importance that the pastoral leadership, together with the board, realizes that no one is indispensable. Leadership *will* change over time. Sometimes it is God's doing as He leads pastors to other ministries. Other times it is man's doing as he disqualifies himself for pastoral leadership. Debilitating sickness or retirement can also necessitate pastoral change. Once the leadership of the church recognizes that pastoral change will occur, it can make plans to proactively take steps to ensure the smoothest possible transition when it does happen.

When it is time to replace a senior pastor, the normal course of action is to invite potential replacement pastors to candidate. These candidates come and preach and meet with the board. If several candidates come in succession, it can turn into a beauty pageant with the most charismatic pastoral candidate receiving the vote (Khurana 2002). Frequently an outsider to the church replaces the outgoing pastor.

A more effective selection process will determine *beforehand*, prior to any crisis, the qualities and skills a church is looking for in a pastor. How can a church know these? Churches can determine these by going back to the church's mission statement and strategy (Wellins, Smith, Paese, and Erker 2007). When a church knows clearly what it is trying to accomplish, it is in a perfect position to specify what qualities and skills the incoming senior pastor *must* possess. This information makes any selection process easier since it measures qualities and skills, not elusive charisma (Khurana 2002).

BENEFITS OF SUCCESSION PLANNING TO THE CHURCH

Analyzing the qualities and skills the church needs in a senior pastor helps in several ways. First it helps the *current* pastor to develop himself/herself to best meet the church's needs (Metz 1998). Second, when a pastoral position is vacant, knowing what is needed allows for creative responses to get the work done, instead of a knee-jerk replacement and hoping for the best (Rothwell 2005). For example, the church's leadership may determine that two people serving part-time, instead of one person working full-time, can more effectively do the senior pastor's job. This arrangement can be short-term or long-term depending on the church's strategy. Finally, it provides the opportunity to train existing leadership before any change takes place (Wellins et al. 2007). If the senior pastor is retiring, the church's leadership, including key members of the congregation and maybe the outgoing pastor, may decide the associate pastor is capable of assuming the senior pastor position. This provides for a very smooth transition.

IMPLEMENTING A SUCCESSION PLANNING PROGRAM IN THE CHURCH

The role of the values, mission, strategy, and objectives in the succession plan of the church

How can a succession-planning program be implemented in the church? A process is necessary to avoid shooting in the dark. The church leadership must begin with its values statement (Well 2003). What does the church hold as non-negotiable (Charan 2005)? What does it firmly believe? From the church's carefully thought-out values comes a well-honed mission statement. If no such statement exists, then one must be developed. These two documents are primary. They must be thoroughly biblical and have the broad support not only of the church leadership but also of the church body. Ideally these statements should be a product of as many adherents as possible. Out of the values statement and the mission statement flow the strategy and objectives of the church for the both short- and long-term. Finally, and only if the strategy and objectives are clearly stated can the job description of the pastor, and the necessary qualities and skills he must possess, be ascertained.

The role of personal development in the succession plan of the church

Leading a church has everything to do with a man or woman called by God. However, it also presupposes that any man or woman called by God will also be growing, allowing the Holy Spirit to direct their continued development (Rom. 8:29; 12:2). When the church leadership has determined the specific qualities and skills they feel are most beneficial for their pastor, then the pastor can discover whether or not there are qualities and skills he does not yet possess, but which can be helpful to the ministry of the church. The same is true for any pastoral successor.

This process of discovery is called 360-degree feedback (Beeson 1998). It involves asking key people to take an objective look at their pastor and suggest how he is doing in each of the delineated qualities and skills. Two caveats are important here. First, the church leadership must be careful to recognize that

pastors are human and are subject to imperfection and weakness (Rom. 3:23; 1 John 1:8). No church should expect the pastor to be a mirror image of Jesus Christ. This is a recipe for failure and heartbreak! This is not a chance to blast the pastor, but rather an opportunity to humbly point out areas where growth is desirable (Gal. 6:1). Second, the pastor must be willing to receive constructive criticism. The pastor is helped when such feedback is offered in the proper spirit.

How does a church go about training someone to develop qualities and skills they do not currently possess? If it is determined that a key quality or skill is missing or underdeveloped, then a plan of action should be drawn up to promote growth in this area (Ready and Conger 2007). Of course, no plan should be overly ambitious. It takes time to achieve spiritual growth of any kind. And yet focused and specific spiritual growth is possible with God's help. It is best to work on one thing at a time and reevaluate in 3 to 6 months. Good habits take time to cultivate (Covey 1990).

For example, many pastors enter the pastorate without any accounting skills or understanding of church tax laws. Most people enter the pastorate because they love people and want to shepherd them. However, it is not possible to effectively lead a church without firmly understanding finances, budgeting, and church tax law. If the 360-degree feedback shows that work is needed in this area, then a specific plan can be crafted to deal with the gap (Rothwell 2005). This plan may involve reading certain appropriate books or attending content seminars. It may involve sitting with accountants in or outside the church or taking a class at a local community college.

CONCLUSION

Some pastors and church leaders will surely respond, "Yes, but we rely on God and the Holy Spirit to coordinate any pastoral succession in the church. After all, it is His church." Yes, but it must not be forgotten that Jesus himself spent the bulk of His ministry time preparing twelve disciples to continue His ministry following His ascension to the Father. Paul also invested a great deal of energy into the preparation of his disciples, not to mention the churches he planted. Both Jesus and Paul peered into the future and warned of trying times that were coming. There is a tremendous need for succession planning in the church. For some churches the crisis has already come. For others, it is just around the corner. One thing is certain; crisis and change are coming. The question is whether the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ will be ready to face it head on.

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