



ADDRESSING THE PASTORAL CRISIS **BETTER TRANSITIONS**

“What will happen to my church?” That was the thought of one of our pastors nearly a year ago as he was lying in a hospital fighting COVID-19. He survived and continues to pastor his church. I know, and he knows, that it is not really his church. But his words convey that he knew the church he pastored would be thrust into a crisis if he died suddenly. His question is critical for all pastors and churches.

Every church faces problems and experiences challenges across its lifespan, but one dangerous (if not the most dangerous) period for a church is a pastoral transition. After a pastor dies, resigns, or is dismissed, a church can experience turmoil because of uncertainty and a leadership vacuum. Sometimes, the difficulty can grow into conflict over who will succeed the pastor. Other times, the new pastor is a poor fit and either the church people or new pastor does not feel as if the other represented themselves truthfully. If there is not a good fit, the church can go into long-term crisis and the pastor and his family can be damaged, some never to minister again. Poor pastoral transitions negatively impact everyone, bogging churches down in conflict resulting in fruitless ministry. Churches can splinter, with people leaving them, some never to return.

On other occasions churches are unable to find a pastor, especially in areas of the country not considered Free Will Baptist strongholds. When a church struggles to find a pastor, the members often become desperate, and some make bad decisions which multiply their problems. Some choose pastors who harm the church. Other churches are forced to close because they have no pastor. Often, churches that close or leave the denomination do so after a prolonged period without a pastor. Good pastoral transitions are critical. What can we do to have better pastoral transitions?

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Prepare for the Inevitable

Perhaps one of the best guides in Scripture about transitions come from the transition of kings. Compare the transitions of David and Hezekiah to their successors.

Initially, David was not focused on the transition of the kingdom (1 Kings 1:11). After some prodding from Nathan and Bathsheba, he began to put order to his transition (1 Kings 1:32-37). His goal was that the people would find greater success after he was gone (1 Kings 1:37). He developed and implemented a transition plan that included discussing with Solomon, his successor, the situations he would face to help prepare him (1 Kings 2:5-9). As a result, the kingdom was on solid footing (1 Kings 2:46). Because of the preparation and follow through of the transition, the kingdom initially experienced a great deal of success (1 Kings 3).

Like David, Hezekiah also was a godly and successful king. He cleansed the Temple and restored worship (2 Chronicles 29). He kept the Passover (2 Chronicles 30) and implemented several important reforms (2 Chronicles 31). As a result, he saw success against the mighty Assyrian King Sennacherib (2 Chronicles 32:1-23) and saw his request for a life extension granted by the Lord (2 Chronicles 32:24). However, he made some seemingly unimportant decisions that had a long-term impact upon those who followed him. His people paid dearly for his pride.

When Isaiah told Hezekiah that those who followed him would experience great difficulty, he did not seem disturbed (2 Kings 20:19). His focus was upon himself and upon what happened while he was at the helm. In part because of his failure to prepare, Judah eventually fell (2 Kings 25). Though he knew he had a 15-year window to plan a transition (Isaiah 38:5), it does not appear Hezekiah engaged in transition planning. As a result, there was a high price to pay by those who followed him. For more on Hezekiah, listen to [Lessons From Hezekiah](#) from the 2019 Leadership Conference.

Seemingly Unimportant Decisions

Like Hezekiah, pastors and church leaders can make seemingly unimportant decisions that come with a high price. Deciding to “isolate” as a church is a seemingly unimportant decision. Pastor, I encourage you to be involved in local and state associations and involve your laity as well. Take them to associational meetings and the National Convention. Connect them to the denominational network. They will be in a better position to find a pastor when you are gone. Also, do your best to grow pastors—for your church and others. We are in the equipping business (Ephesians 4:11-12)!

Another seemingly unimportant decision is allowing strife to persist in a church (Proverbs 17:14). Sometimes, the problems of today are rooted in the sins of yesterday. For good transitions to occur, the leadership and the church body as a whole must support the pastor (Hebrews 13:17). You cannot mentor leaders while simultaneously fending off a pastoral coup. So, if you can avoid one, by all means do. Strive for unity (Ephesians 4:3), and do your best to make the situation better. No one wins in power struggles.

Planning Works

Can the principles involved in the successful transition of a kingdom really be applied to a pastoral transition? Our churches are autonomous, and pastors should not choose their replacements. But church leaders can openly discuss and prepare for transitions.

Paul instructed Timothy to set in order (Titus 1:5) the church, which is an apt description of David’s activities. What we

do today has a long-term impact, and there is great value in planning and preparing for future transitions.

Based on data, as David Kinnaman says, "Successful leadership transitions require careful planning." Unfortunately, this needed planning is rarely implemented. In a recent study, 51% of incoming pastors said there was no planning at the church before the previous pastor began to transition out of the pastorate. This created a negative impact upon the church and the incoming pastor. One-third of incoming pastors reported that a lack of planning created extreme difficulty (12%) or major obstacles (21%) to achieving ministry success.¹

On the other hand, when a congregation plans ahead, the overall transition can be shortened once the process begins. Ideally, a pastor is able to pass the baton to another pastor before leaving a church. One study indicated that in some cases, the best transitions took longer and involved an outgoing pastor who chose to retire.²

To hear about this kind of transition, listen to the Better Together Podcast, "[Effective Transitions in the Ministry](#)" with Rusty Russell. To see the transition from the view of an incoming and outgoing pastor as well as a deacon, you can read the *ONE Magazine* article "[From One Pastor to Another: The Test and Testimony of a Pastoral Transition.](#)"

In multi-staff churches, the most positive pastoral transitions occurred when a senior pastor transitioned to associate pastor (67%). Unfortunately, most Free Will Baptist churches do not have this opportunity, since they are solo pastorates. Incidentally, this is not unusual. Dr. Gary McIntosh is working on a book about solo pastors. In his preliminary research of eight denominations, 80.5% of churches are pastored by solo pastors, like Free Will Baptists.³ For the solo church, the pastoral transition tends to be more difficult. Read Brandon Roysden's *PULPIT* magazine article "[Lessons in Leaving](#)" for guidance on this process.

How does good planning look?

Kinnaman says you should have a plan, because transitions with no plan tend to take longer. Many of us find ourselves in less-than-ideal situations over which we have little control. In these cases, we must do the best we can. Wherever we find ourselves in the process, we must do our best to plan. Research indicates that the more decisions made outside of the "heat of the moment," the more positive the results. Church leaders often find themselves in this situation suddenly. However, when they keep a congregation informed, the transition goes more smoothly. Even if much has gone awry, Kinnaman notes "strong communication can cover a multitude of succession sins."⁴

Free Will Baptist Moderator Tim York has said, "In a way the relationship between a pastor and a church is a marriage." It would be helpful to listen to his [Better Together podcast](#) on the subject.

York has worked with state leaders to develop two tools that will be helpful to churches. One is a [Church Questionnaire](#). Completing this kind of questionnaire can help a church examine itself and think through what it needs in a pastor. The information provided to a pastoral candidate also provides key information to help him determine if he could minister effectively in such a setting. The team also has designed a [Pastoral Questionnaire](#). These two tools mirror each other. Please note that both of these tools are a work in progress. We know they are not perfect, and they will be revised over time. However, churches and coaches can use them now to help others.

Research also indicates that transition goes better when it involves a multitude of counselors (Proverbs 11:14; 15:22; 24:6). We encourage churches to work closely with their state leaders. They can also contact the National Offices (questions@nafwb.org), and we will try to connect them with a coach who can help them navigate the process. Take

a look at Free Will Baptist deacon Brandon Roysden's article "[Pastor Wanted](#)" for helpful actions to take during the transition process.

Help With Protracted Searches

When churches struggle to find a pastor, they can become desperate and make major mistakes. For example, some churches choose pastors who have not been fully vetted. Others choose pastors from other denominations. Though this approach may work in the short term, once that pastor ages out of the ministry or moves to another location, the church often has more difficulty finding another pastor. *Isolated churches are vulnerable churches.* According to research, when churches have an interim pastor or pulpit supply, they are less stressed and enabled to more effectively work through the transition process.

Read Dr. Roy Harris' *ONE Magazine* article, "[The Interim Pastor](#)" where he describes this process. If you want to serve as an interim pastor, complete the [Pastoral Questionnaire](#) and email questions@nafwb.org to let us know you are interested in being part of an interim pastor network.

Here to Help

We want to hear from you. We will do anything we can to help our churches through this critical process. Please look at the resources developed with North American Ministries at www.nafwb.org/Refresh. We hope to continue to develop more aids for our churches including forms, articles, podcasts, coaching, and seminars.

All of us will pass from the scene one day. Hopefully, we have carefully considered how to pass the baton to those who follow, thus increasing the likelihood they will succeed. If we work together to be more thoughtful about transitions, then those who follow will be stronger and more effective for the Kingdom (1 Kings 1:37).

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¹ Barna Group. August 6, 2019. Planned Pastoral Transitions Lead to Better Results: <https://www.barna.com/research/pastoral-transitions/>

² Barna Group. August 6, 2019. Planned Pastoral Transitions Lead to Better Results: <https://www.barna.com/research/pastoral-transitions/>

³ Personal communication with Dr. Gary McIntosh.

⁴ Barna Group. August 6, 2019. Planned Pastoral Transitions Lead to Better Results: <https://www.barna.com/research/pastoral-transitions/>

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