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A Retiring Pastor: The Most Severe Earthquake Your Church *Can* Survive

For the next decade, thousands of pastors will retire each year as the result of the aging, massive demographic of baby boomers.

“Can you help our church?” said the lay leader of the church in Illinois, as he connected with my colleague Tracee. “We heard from leaders in our denomination,” he continued, “Church Doctor is very well respected when it comes to helping churches.”

“Perhaps,” responded Tracee. “What are your needs?”

“Well,” continued the leader, “we have formed a committee to analyze our seven worship services. Our church is plateaued. We have many services: one Saturday evening, five on Sunday — in two locations on campus, and one on Monday night. The sanctuary is never full. We think we ought to cut out one or two of the services.”

After a pause in the conversation, Tracee asked, “So, how would you like us to help?”

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challenges. He is the author of more than thirty books. His most recent book, to be released September 12, 2017, is available for preorder on Amazon: *Who Broke My Church? 7 Proven Strategies for Renewal and Revival*.

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MULTIPLYING MINISTRY

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“Well,” the leader continued, “we did some surveys on our own.”

“What did you learn?” Tracee asked.

“The surveys were inconclusive. We’ve been working at this for two years, and we really don’t know how to proceed. Would you be able to help us?” the leader asked.

“Here’s what I would propose,” Tracee responded. “We’ll develop a comprehensive survey, specifically for your church. We’ll run it by you for input. Then we’ll send it and ask you to distribute it in each worship service to your 1,400 worshippers. We will code each of the worship services so that we can compare them. Then two of our consultants will come onsite and attend all your services incognito. After that, for three days, each of us will interview people, representing all your worship services. Then we’ll develop a report with recommendations and return to give an oral report for the staff and your worship committee.”

Fast forward to two days before the onsite visit. Tracee calls the senior pastor, “Pastor, we’re all ready to travel to work with your church tomorrow. We have only communicated with the leader of your worship committee, as you requested. But we just wanted to make sure that we spoke with you before we arrived. Is there anything you would like to add?”

“No, I can't think of anything,” the pastor said. “Oh, did anyone tell you that after 14 years here as senior pastor, I'm retiring in two months?”

WHAT?

(True story, different state).

The Retirement Shakeup

One of the most significant events in the life of a church is the retirement of a long-tenured pastor. When there is a pastoral change, the church focuses on a transition that can shake the church family, like a major earthquake.

The succession of pastors, especially lead pastors, is one of the most challenging, important, and dangerous events in the history of every church. It can be a major blessing for the next chapter of history, or it can be your worst nightmare. Everything in the history of your church is on the line when you go through a major transition of leadership.

Most pastors have little or no leadership skills to guide this process. Nor do most church members. Even leaders of corporations find it difficult to apply their experience to the world of the church. The local church is more like a family than a business. If the retiring senior pastor has baptized your kids, or conducted the funeral for your parent, the transition is like the loss of another relative. It seems that congregations consistently underestimate the enormous challenges and opportunities at stake in the succession experience. So do most pastors.

Timing is crucial. Retiring pastors should privately confer with church leaders three years before retirement. A confidential three-year plan should outline step by step the procedure to move forward.

Why three years? The best succession plans include a thorough assessment by an objective, outside consulting group. This should include a report that focuses on strengths, challenges, and recommendations for the next chapter of the congregation's life. It should include a reflection of the gift mix of the entire staff, including the retiring pastor. It should have an "ideal" gift mix, target age, family structure, and experience level for the next pastor, all of which speak to the needs of the congregation in its future chapter of history.

If the retiring pastor has been effective, most people in a congregation will want a clone to follow. An outside professional can help the congregation members realize that a clone is impossible and not likely what God has in mind. Each chapter in the history of a congregation is unique and, often, cause for different spiritual gifts, skills, and even personality traits.

The church leadership needs time to develop a well-articulated philosophy of ministry. This is a document that reflects the personality of the church. It is extremely important for the next pastor to understand the unique personality of the congregation. Church leaders should follow the book *Your Church Has Personality* to develop a philosophy of ministry.

Discipling Overlap

One year before the pastor's retirement, the church should be calling the successor. This is perhaps the most important step in the process. The retiring pastor and the replacement pastor should work together, side by side, for at least nine months. Why?

Every church has its own unique culture. Culture is more caught than taught. The retiring pastor should "disciple" the new pastor in the culture of the church: the unique values, beliefs, attitudes, priorities, and worldviews. This is not a time of cloning, or a time to tell the new pastor what to do, after the retiring pastor leaves. This is a time of assimilation. This overlap step is very important.

KEY RESOURCES

Dahlke, Arnie. *Business Succession Planning for Dummies*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012.

Hunter, Kent R. *Your Church Has Personality: Find Your Focus, Maximize Your Mission*. Corunna, IN: Church Growth Center, 1997.

Rothwell, William J. *Effective Succession Planning: Ensuring Leadership Continuity and Building Talent from Within*. New York: AMACOM, 2010.

Sweetser, Thomas P., and Mary Benet. McKinney. *Changing Pastors: A Resource for Pastoral Transitions*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1998.

Tichy, Noel M. *Succession: Mastering the Make or Break Process of Leadership Transition*. New York, NY: Portfolio/Penguin, 2014.

Timms, Michael. *Succession Planning That Works: The Critical Path of Leadership Development*. Victoria, BC Canada: FriesenPress, 2016.

Why do few churches overlap the outgoing and incoming lead pastors? First, they fail to see the importance of culture. Think about it this way: if you went to live in another country, even one that speaks some form of your native language, it would take you approximately nine months to learn the culture. It is naïve for church members to believe that a pastor from another congregation who has inherited and/or shaped a different culture in a previous church will automatically fit the culture of the new church.

The second reason churches don't plan an overlap of the retiring and the new pastor is, of course, money. What many fail to realize is the incredible cost of cultural dissonance. What do you think it costs a congregation when a new pastor unintentionally superimposes the culture from the last church onto the new one? People leave or, if it gets too difficult, they may ask the new pastor to leave. When people leave the church, they take their offerings. A misfire transition can cripple a church.

Even if you have to borrow the money to pay the salaries for both pastors, for nine to 12 months, you are financially ahead. However, you can treat this concept like a building campaign: "Will everyone pledge to give, above and beyond their offerings, for the next three years to help assure a seamless transition?"

Nothing is more costly than a misstep in pastoral transition. Make a plan now. A transition of pastors in your near future is likely. Plan it right and survive the earthquake!

THE TEN STEPS TOWARD HEALTHY SUCCESSION

1. Start early: three years, whenever possible. Inform leaders only, avoid lame duck pastoral ministry.
2. Develop a step-by-step plan, with a timeline.
3. Announce publicly your pastor is retiring 12 months in advance.
4. Ask an outside objective church consulting group to conduct an independent, thorough analysis of the church: strengths, needs, recommendations, and a written report, ideally completed and made public eighteen months before the retirement date.
5. Use the consultant's report to inform a potential succession candidate. It will signal how seriously you consider the succession process and the choice of that next candidate. It will help a candidate to make an informed decision.
6. Develop (or update) a clear philosophy of ministry statement, using the book *Your Church Has Personality*.
7. Provide the church philosophy of ministry statement, a mission or purpose statement, and a short bio for each member of the staff team and leadership group for the candidate to review (along with the analysis report, number 4 above).
8. Identify the spiritual gifts of each staff team member, the gifts of the retiring pastor, and the perceived ideal gift mix of a preferred candidate — provided by the outside consultant.
9. Invite potential candidates to visit, with their families, at your expense. The cost is the second best investment your church will make for succession.
10. The first most important investment your church will make is to overlap the new pastor and the retiring pastor for at least nine months, identifying the role of the retiring pastor as a "discipler of your church's unique culture" and the new pastor as a "disciple of your church's unique culture." The cost of overlapping two salaries is the best financial investment you will make.