

## 4 Succession Planning Trends For Church Leaders

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The longer I work in church staffing, the more I am convinced of this truth:

*The most expensive hire you can ever make is hiring the wrong person.*

Taken one step further, the most expensive bad hire that a church can ever make is a bad hire of a new Senior Pastor. Unfortunately, I've heard too many stories of bad transitions, inefficient Senior Pastor searches, or poorly planned Senior Pastor successions.

So what are smart, growing churches doing to ensure a good Senior Pastor search and a well-planned transition? What steps should churches be taking to ensure that their eventual leadership transition goes smoothly and to mitigate the chances of problems?

As my team works with churches across the country and around the world, we're starting to see several succession trends emerge. Every church and every leadership transition is unique. But there are some common themes emerging from the churches that are doing this well and planning ahead.

### Trend 1: Secure the outgoing Senior Pastor's new pastoral identity.

Many Senior Pastors have been serving at their church for twenty or more years, and their identity is defined by their ministry and their responsibility to their church. I don't know of another job that ties identity to vocation as much as ministry does. Ministry is more than just a job, and it's a 24/7 occupation that requires more emotional and spiritual energy than any other occupation. When that goes away, pastors are left asking, "Who am I?"

Smart churches are answering that question by finding a way to say, “What is your identity and plan after you leave here? Let’s talk about it ahead of time. Let’s write it down, establish it, and help you start to plan it.”

For some churches, that means the pastor is going to start with a vacation paid for by the board. It may be six months to a year so that the new pastor can get their feet on the ground and build leadership trust as the new pastor. While that sort of expense may sound extravagant, smart boards are realizing that an extended sabbatical for the outgoing Senior Pastor both honors their longtime leader and provides a buffer period for the new Senior Pastor to get established. In the end, I believe this is an expense that pays for itself.

Many denominational churches have a policy that the outgoing pastor cannot be a part of the church for a designated amount of time. Having a policy in place before a pastoral transition ensures that the outgoing pastor knows the lay of the land before they hand off their job.

I’ve seen other churches create a clearly defined new staff role for the outgoing pastor. One example that comes to mind is a church whose outgoing pastor left for a season and then returned by invitation from the new pastor in the position of Pastor of Designated Giving. It gave the outgoing Senior Pastor a new, defined identity and purpose. Many churches create roles for the outgoing Senior Pastor around their passions. I’ve seen new roles as a Pastor of Missions for a particular part of the world, Pastor of Caring Ministries, and many others. In all cases, the new role gave the outgoing Senior Pastor a clear identity as they entered uncharted territory in their life and ministry.

Bottom line: smart churches are setting up a successful succession by clearly identifying the outgoing pastor’s identity as it relates to the church.

*What are some areas within your church where your outgoing pastor could eventually find their new purpose?*

## Trend 2: Establish the financial security of both the outgoing & incoming pastor.

Too many times, a pastor has been told by their board that they will be “taken care of when they retire,” only to have the board forget or have a different expectation of what that means. Succession is *much* harder to talk about when a pastor is 65 and realizes they have no retirement funds or equity in a house.

Smart churches are getting ahead of the curve by setting up retirement committees that help plan the outgoing pastor's retirement and set up deferred compensation. You may even consider setting up the deferred compensation based on objectives met during the pastor's service at the church.

On the flip side, there is a graveyard miles long of good pastors who succeeded long tenured pastors and ended up being "sacrificial lambs." Smart pastoral candidates know this reality and desire to be a part of a church that has a thorough, healthy succession plan and is willing to care for their family in the long-term. I'm seeing more and more churches that are willing to put money on the line for the incoming pastor in case the succession fails. It makes the board more likely to try and create a winning scenario, and it reduces anxiety for the new pastor and their family. What would be an assurance you could offer your new pastor?

Bottom line: smart churches are doing everything it takes to relieve financial anxiety for both the incoming and outgoing pastor. It may seem expensive now, but the cost of a bad transition is far, far higher.

*How is your church reducing anxiety by creating identity for your outgoing pastor? Is there a pension plan? Have you discussed establishing a "rabbi trust?" Can you set up a committee to help the pastor plan his retirement (assuming they would like the help)? And are you providing financial assurances for your incoming pastor? Has your church considered offering the incoming pastor a financial parachute if his succession fails?*

## Trend 3: Know your church's identity.

Socrates is credited with saying, "Know thyself." Growing, healthy churches are becoming fine tuned in their vision, their mission, their identity, and their unique position in their community. Having a firm, honest, and consistent view of your identity as a church makes succession planning and a Senior Pastor search much easier.

Nearly every church I know has a mission statement. Most of them are some form of the Great Commission, but the smartest churches I know take it to a more granular level and ask, "What are we uniquely positioned to do in this particular moment for this particular place?"

When churches possess vision clarity, they're able to begin to understand what the next pastor needs to look like.

Smart churches are asking these questions as they explore this:

- Are things going great, and we're just looking for a natural extension of who we've always been?
- Have we become stale and need a 2.0 version of who we've been to refresh our vision?
- Or are we in a place where we need a radical change? How do we prepare the congregation for that before we bring someone in?

Knowing who you are ahead of time will help you as you assess candidates. It's too easy to hear a great sermon from a talented young candidate who has a good-looking family and fall in love with them before you ever take the time to ask, "Does this candidate fit where we are at this time or where we want to go?"

Bottom line: know yourself well. You'll alleviate the chances of a bad transition and increase your chances of a good transition.

## Trend 4: Create an emergency succession plan.

One final trend I see in smart churches is that they're anticipating what no one wants to anticipate. What would happen if there were an emergency succession now that nobody sees coming? What would happen if your current pastor got seriously ill? What if he were hired away? What if he were no longer able to do his job?

One church I know had begun preliminary succession discussions when the pastor had a sudden stroke and was incapacitated. Instead of looking for an Associate Pastor, they found themselves in need of a new Senior Pastor, and, fortunately, already had begun putting a plan in place for this scenario.

There's also the less fortunate story where a moral failure occurs in the pastor's life - some money is missing or there's a relationship that shouldn't have happened. I'm afraid that until Jesus returns, these are going to be realities that will occasionally occur. And when they do occur, they blindside the church.

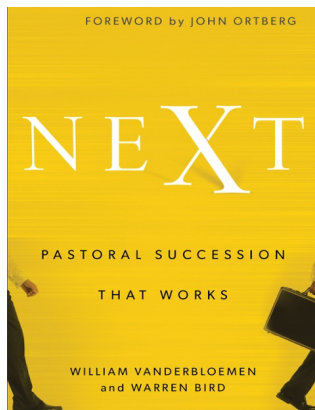
Bottom line: smart churches are developing an emergency succession plan. Please note that developing emergency transition plans is not about a lack of confidence in your pastor or his integrity. It's an acknowledgement that we live in a broken world and unexpected things happen. Your church and church staff can rest easy knowing there are plans in place for any leadership emergency.

*What would we do if our pastor couldn't preach this Sunday? What would we do if they couldn't preach on Easter or Christmas? What if they were suddenly gone in the midst of a capital campaign?*

With your board and church leadership, ask yourself these questions and establish a step-by-step process to manage the emergency succession in both the short-term and the long-term.

Whether you're looking at a long-term succession plan or just beginning to think about what an emergency succession would look like, these best practices will point you toward a smooth transition. If our team can help you in any way, please contact us directly. We work with churches on these issues all day every day, and would be honored to speak with you about your unique situation.

In the end, every pastor is an interim pastor. The greatest legacy a pastor can leave is a successful succession.



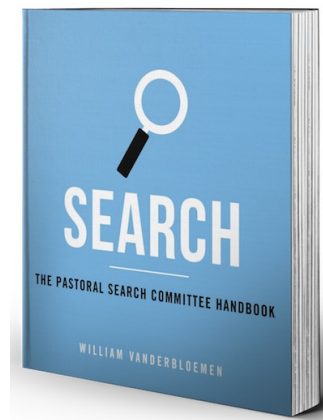
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