COVENANT
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Electronic Thesis & Dissertation Collection

J. Oliver Buswell Jr. Library
12330 Conway Road
Saint Louis, MO 63141

www.covenantseminary.edu/library

Transition from Founding Pastor to First Successor Pastor
Every Pastor is an Interim Pastor

By
Christopher A. Polski

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

2020

Transition from Founding Pastor to First Successor Pastor
Every Pastor is an Interim Pastor

By
Christopher A. Polski

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry.

Graduation Date: May 2021

Dr. Bruce McRae
Faculty Advisor

_____

Dr. Robert Kim
Second Reader

_____

Dr. Joel Hathaway
Director of DMin Program

_____

Abstract

Stories of conflict, loss and congregational collapse are far too common during seasons of pastoral transition and especially so when the transition in view is the transition from the founding pastor to the first successor pastor, a circumstance that presents a highly unique set of challenges that often prompt a crisis of identity within a still young congregation. The purpose of the study is to explore how church leaders describe influential factors in their process of transitioning from a founding pastor to a first successor pastor.

This study made use of a qualitative design utilizing semi-structured interviews of founding pastors, first successor pastors and key church leaders who were involved in congregations in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) that had recently undergone a transition from a founding pastor to a first successor pastor.

The literature review focused on surveying insights and principles related to transition in the following fields of inquiry: Core Ministry Practices, initial Biblical leadership transitions, leadership transitions in stepfamilies, leadership transitions in business, and leadership transitions in churches.

This study revealed that there are seven key principles that must be considered in relation to a first pastoral transition:

Principle #1: Every Pastor Is an Interim Pastor
Principle #2: Founding Pastors Make a Unique Mark
Principle #3: Plan for Transition Now
Principle #4: Continually Recalibrate Your Culture for Smoother Transition
Principle #5: Transition Isn't Over when the New Pastor is Installed
Principle #6: Engage the Inevitable Loss in Transition
Principle #7: Even in Difficult Initial Transitions, Hope Remains

The long-term hope for this study has been to give founding pastors, church planting core groups and church sessions working alongside a founding pastor, tools to heighten their awareness surrounding the complexity and inevitability of an initial leadership transition in their congregation and to suggest to them a number of principles and strategies that may be helpful in making the transition as healthy as possible.

The notion that organizations, independent of their tax status, shouldn't be focused on the development and succession of their leadership, especially at the top, strikes me as patently absurd...there is no reason that institutions in the not-for-profit sector shouldn't be held accountable for the development of the next generation of leadership.

-- Noel Tichy, *Succession.*

Contents

Illustrations

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to all those who assisted in the process of preparing this project, especially those friends and family who were willing to meet and give feedback on various parts of the study. Additionally, my sincere thanks to the leadership and people of Trinity Church Kirkwood who generously gave me time away from my normal pastoral duties to work on this project.

A special thanks to David and Brenda Creech who provided the use of their condominium for me to escape and concentrate on writing and reading in the early stages of this research.

I am also grateful to my wife Katie who gave me leave to disappear into my study on several occasions when it may not have been very convenient for me to do so. You are my best friend.

Finally, a special thanks to those founding pastors, successor pastors, and church leaders who gave me access to their views on transition and especially for providing their open and candid answers surrounding several topics that, for some, remain painful and difficult.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Abbreviations

PCA   Presbyterian Church in America

SBC   Southern Baptist Convention

UMC   United Methodist Church

BCO   Book of Church Order

Chapter 1

Introduction

When the day began, the long-time elder had no idea that it would end in the emergency room with an irregular heartbeat, but it did. The palpitations began at the conclusion of a contentious church leadership meeting in which long-time friends and partners in ministry had crossed lines and said words that could never be taken back. Some spoke in fervent support of the church's new pastor; others spoke in vehement opposition. By the time the meeting had concluded, friendships been severed, reputations sullied, the church had most certainly been split, and the name of Christ tarnished.

As the elder sat in the emergency room alongside his supportive but equally broken wife, trying to catch his breath and calm his heart, he wondered how and where it had all gone wrong. Was there anything that he or anyone could have done to head off the disaster that struck their congregation after their founding pastor left?

Sadly, stories like this are common. While statistics on church splits are difficult to locate, one study on general church conflict conducted by *Christianity Today* led its author, Eric Reed, to conclude:

> Apart from the pastor's personal hurts, the collateral damage of conflict in the church is mostly in relationships. By the way congregations handle disputes, personal friendships are damaged in more than two-thirds of the cases; for almost as many a sadness remains long after the fighting

has ceased…Like the 38% of pastors who eventually leave, a similar number of members and leaders look for a new church.[1]

The fact that over one-third of pastors affected by significant church conflict subsequently leave their church suggests that churches lack reliable research and tools for managing pastoral transition, even though some good work over the past twenty years has begun to contribute more perspective to the process.

Ed Bratcher and his colleagues Robert Kemper and Douglass Scott wrote a practical guide for pastors contemplating a transition from one ministry context to another.[2] Some more focused works on pastoral transition within specific denominational contexts have also proven useful.[3,4] Additionally, one Covenant Theological Seminary dissertation has examined the impacts of a long term pastorate on transition, and another has focused on issues surrounding a pastor settling in to his new calling.[5,6]

A more recent overview of the challenges of pastoral transition entitled *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works* by Vanderbloemen, Bird and Ortberg takes a closer look

---

[1] Eric Reed, "Leadership Surveys Church Conflict," *Christianity Today*, 2004, http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2004/fall/6.25.html.

[2] Ed Bratcher, Robert Kemper, and Douglas Scott, *Mastering Transitions* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Books, 1991).

[3] Marc Anthony Maffucci, "The Process and Pitfalls of Pastoral Transition: A Study of the Pastoral Transitions within the North American Baptist Conference" (DMin Diss., Western Seminary, 1999).

[4] Julian L. Suarez, "The Practice of Pastoral Ministry Transition among Independent Baptist Churches" (DMin Diss., Bob Jones University, 2004).

[5] Lawrence A. Gilpin, "When the Long-Term Pastor Leaves: The Local Church Process of Pastoral Transition in the Presbyterian Church in America" (DMin Diss., Covenant Theological Seminary, 2006).

[6] Michael Kennison, "Making a Move: Exploring Factors That Contribute to a Successful Pastoral Transition" (DMin Diss., Covenant Theological Seminary, 2012).

at the nuances involved in pastoral transition using a case study approach.[7] This work is

of particular value because it examines the issue of pastoral transition across

denominational lines, taking into consideration the various polities to make better sense

of what occurred in the cases it studied.

These contributions are useful for pastors and congregations faced with the

daunting task of transition. However, none of these studies addresses the context of a

founding pastor leaving the church that said pastor had planted.[8] Instead, many experts

blend the transitions of founding pastors and long-term pastors as if they presented the

same challenges. This conflation, at least according to this researcher, overlooks some of

the unique issues involved in the transition of a founding pastor.

In a recent Banner of Truth article, Gary Brady defines a long-term pastorate. "A

preliminary question is 'what is a long ministry?' Given that it is very rare for anyone to

enter the ministry under the age of 20 and that normal life expectancy is around 70,

anything from 20-25 years up ought to be considered a long ministry."[9]

Conversely, Thom Rainer, a Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) consultant says

that a long-term pastorate is anything over seven years. In a recent blog he commented:

> The median tenure of a pastor at a church is around four years. Simply
> stated, over one-half of pastors leave a church before their fourth
> anniversary. And our research shows that the time of greatest fruit in a

---

[7] William Vanderbloemen, Warren Bird, and John Ortberg, *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works*, rep. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2015).

[8] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*. 78–85. Chapter 7 of this work is dedicated to "Founder's Syndrome" but the authors regularly blend the headings "founding pastor" and "long term pastor" as they work through the data in this chapter, which in the view of this researcher, may indicate some lack of appreciation for the unique transition that occurs from the founding pastor to the first successor.

[9] Gary Brady, "A Long-Term Pastorate – Pitfalls and Positives," Banner of Truth USA, November 15, 2013, https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2013/long-term-pastorate-pitfalls-positives/.

pastor's ministry does not begin until somewhere around years five to seven.[10]

While founding pastors who remain at their church for ten or even twenty years or more can certainly be described as long-term pastors, not all long term-pastors can be described as founding pastors. Even though valuable insights about transitions in long term pastorates are useful in an initial transition situation, those transitions involving a founding pastor have their own set of unique challenges.

According to Ted Powers, the church planting coordinator for the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), a founding pastor has a unique place in the life of a church.

> For one reason, the church has become very attached to the planter and identifies more strongly with him than in a church where they may have had multiple pastors over the years. There is more of a sense that *he* is the church vs. *we* are the church. We were here before him and we'll be here after him.' As a result, the next guy can never live up to or replace the founding pastor.[11]

Craig Ott and Gene Wilson have written a respected manual for church planting. In it they note that founding pastors often bring personality characteristics to their work that may make them excellent at planting churches while at the same time causing difficulty in their ability to sustain them. "Because church planters often have pioneering and entrepreneurial personalities, they sometimes have little patience for defining goals

---

[10] Thom Rainer, "Ten Traits of Pastors Who Have Healthy Long-Term Tenure," ThomRainer.com, September 29, 2014, https://thomrainer.com/2014/09/ten-traits-pastors-healthy-long-term-tenure/.

[11] Ted Powers, email message to author, (September 29, 2016).

or answering fundamental questions about the nature of the task. But not doing so is like setting out to build a house without blueprints."[12]

While these individuals may be gifted at initiating a church, they are often not prone to thinking about how to sustain such a church or how to transition the congregation to a succeeding pastor.

Additionally, the church planting pastor can rapidly forge a deep and intimate relationship with his core group as they jointly experience the deep joys and daunting challenges involved in becoming a functioning and sustainable church body. In this regard, the planting pastor quickly develops a level of credibility with the recently established congregation akin to, but perhaps even deeper than, that developed over the span of a long-term pastorate.[13]

For this reason, the transition of a founding pastor to his immediate successor, especially if that founder has been in the church for a long period of time, presents a crisis of identity within a still young congregation which can then create such instability that it is virtually impossible, as Powers states above, for the first successor pastor to have long term success, if any success at all![14]

---

[12] Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 3.

[13] Dr. Robert Rayburn describes the essence of a long-term pastorate in this way: "There is a kind of relationship between minister and congregation, a most sacred and fruitful relationship, a relationship of love, trust and confidence, that is created only when the relationship is longstanding." Dale Welden, "The Impact of the Long-Term Pastorate" (D.Min. diss., Covenant Theological Seminary, 2001), quoting Dr. Robert Rayburn. 20.

[14] Anecdotally, this researcher knows of few churches in his own presbytery that can claim to have had a successful transition from a planting pastor to a first successor. All of them struggled and some of them failed.

Where then can churches turn for insights into this unique situation? Interestingly, the challenges faced during an initial transition are similar to those faced in the context of businesses seeking to make a transition from the founding first generation entrepreneur to the immediate successor and in stepfamilies in which children are compelled to adapt to the presence of a new stepparent who, at least in some sense, assumes the role and responsibilities of the original biological parent no longer present.

As to the business comparison, Michael Kruse, a blogger focusing on the intersection of work, the global economy, and Christian mission, argues that business, and especially a family business, is actually an organizational cousin to a church, saying, "We need to recover an image of the church along the lines of a family business."[15]

Literature, guides, and handbooks dealing with the matter of family business transition are extensive. However, despite the proliferation of helps, experts on the matter of family business succession suggest that most still have not put the thought or time into the matter that they should. One expert writes, "Failure to plan and manage succession well is the greatest threat to the survival of family business."[16] Consequently, they add, "No wonder less than a third of family businesses survive into the second generation, and only about 13% make it into the third."[17] These statistics lead one to wonder about the

---

[15] Michael Kruse, "Church as a Family Business," Kruse Kronicle (blog), January 8, 2009, http://www.krusekronicle.com/kruse_kronicle/2009/01/church-as-a-family-business.html.

[16] C. Aronoff, S. McClure, and J. Ward, *Family Business Succession: The Final Test of Greatness*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1.

[17] Aronoff, McClure, and Ward, *Family Business Succession*, 1.

number of church plants that survive or thrive into the second or third generation of pastoral leadership.

Thinking beyond the realm of business, church leaders can discover fruitful fields of inquiry in the comparison of the church to a family and especially, for the purpose of this paper, families adapting to a second marriage and stepfamily context.

Ron Deal, writing on the complexity of the stepfamily experience, says:

> For a stepfamily, a wedding is not the beginning; it's the middle. Stepfamilies are born out of the loss of previous family relationships; that is, they are created when a marriage follows death, divorce or an out of wedlock birth. This loss creates a paradox of emotions for the new stepfamily: hand in hand with joy and hope linger sadness and grief.[18]

Stepchildren are often asked to afford the same level of respect to a new stepparent as to their own biological parent now absent, creating a myriad of contradictory emotions and responses in their effort to adjust to their new family system.

Statement of the Problem

While it is clear that good research on the question of pastoral transitions exists, particularly from the pastor's perspective, detailed research on the narrower question of transition from a founding pastorate to a successor pastorate is lacking, and especially from the perspective of the congregation and its remaining organic leadership.[19]

---

[18] Ron L. Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family*, (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2014), 227.

[19] The researcher conducted a number of online searches of the phrase "transition from a founding pastor" on or near October 1, 2016 and received no direct hits on books or statistical studies on this specific topic

What can existing church leaders learn from churches that have passed through the season of first transition that can be helpful to those churches who have yet to face this most complex of circumstances?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of the study is to explore how church leaders describe influential factors in their process of transitioning from the founding pastor (FP) to the first successor pastor (SP).

Research Questions

In order to best ascertain the factors that were most influential this study will focus on the following research questions.

1. In what ways did the church's leadership prepare itself for the transition from the founding pastor to the first successor pastor?

2. What factors in the actual process of transitioning from the founding pastor to the first successor pastor were most influential?

3. How did ministry leadership differences between the founding pastor and the first successor pastor impact the church in the process of transitioning from one to the other?

4. Which overall factors were most influential in the eventual outcome of the

---

and only a small number of hits for online or magazine articles from the following search engines: 1) Mobius 2) Amazon.com 3) Google.com 4) Yahoo.com.

transition from the founding pastor to the first successor pastor?

Significance of the Study

With the wisdom of godly scholars, pastors and lay-people who have thought deeply about the marks of healthy, well-functioning and God-honoring churches, and who have personally experienced an initial pastoral transition, leaders can identify and apply vital principles for facing an initial transition from a founding pastor to a first successor. If these principles could be distilled and delivered to founding pastors and their leadership teams during the season before transition, and even further back into the season of church planting itself, these best ministry practices could build confidence for healthier transitions of first-generation churches and provide some insulation against the grave and painful interpersonal conflict found in many church breakdowns.

With research into this specific topic more readily available, more church planting pastors, church planting teams, and church planting mentors could access practical tools for preserving the long-term health of their newly planted congregation. Further, taking into account the research of this study, the PCA might be able to make some careful edits to its *Book of Church Order* to better protect pastors involved in initial transitions and better enable congregations transitioning from their planting pastor to a pastor already serving their congregation in another role without having to overcome such high procedural standards along the way.

Definition of Key Terms

Presbyterian Church in America (PCA): A Reformed, Presbyterian, conservative, and evangelical denomination founded in the USA in 1973.

Ruling Elder: A member of a local church body elected to serve the congregation as a shepherd and overseer.

Teaching Elder: Typically, a seminary educated individual ordained to preach, teach, equip, administer the sacraments, and moderate the session of a local church.

Session: A body of at least one ruling elder and one teaching elder who meet together to govern a local church.

Presbytery: A regional church body in a Presbyterian denomination that oversees the work of the churches in its assigned geographical region.

Founding Pastor: The ordained teaching elder who leads in the establishment of a local congregation.

Interim Pastor: The ordained teaching elder who temporarily bridges the gap between elected pastors.

Successor Pastor: The ordained teaching elder elected to lead the local church congregation following the departure of the founding pastor.

Church Plant: A local church congregation initiated by another church body, a presbytery or a denominational agency.

Church Split: A phrase describing a situation in which a significant portion of members from a local church body leave an existing church to found a new church due to significant conflict.

Splant: A slang term used to describe a situation in which a moderately disgruntled group of people from a local church body are encouraged to leave their church home and plant a new church for the sake of preserving the peace of the existing church body.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of the study is to explore how church leaders describe influential factors in their process of transitioning from the founding pastor to the first successor pastor. Ultimately, this study seeks to offer practical guidance for this initial transition when it eventually occurs. To provide the foundation for this study, the literature review explores several related categories.

First, in order to develop a framework for measuring core ministry practices, the study surveys how experts in ministry leadership define foundational ministry practices in the context of the local church.

Second, in an effort to develop an illustrative biblical context, the researcher explores two important biblical stories of initial transition, one full of positive principles (Moses to Joshua) and the other rife with problems (Samuel to Saul).

Third, seeking common grace principles outside of the context of scripture, the study investigates the similarities between the local church and a family and a business, seeking insights regarding the transition effecting stepfamilies who must incorporate a new stepparent and businesses that must replace a founder or chief executive officer.

Finally, the researcher reviews what church experts report as key components for successful transition.

Core Ministry Practices

The work of transitioning from the leadership of one pastor to another often prompts members of a congregation to reflect on what they most appreciated about the ministry of the departing pastor and in turn, what they most desire in the ministry of the new pastor. At the base of this consideration, even if it is subconscious, are the church's core ministry practices, often a group of fundamental ministry practices common to most Christian churches and instrumental to a church member's experience and opinion of the pastor's ministry.

Aside from scripture itself, there is perhaps no better place to turn for insight into these practices than to the foundational doctrinal standards of our tradition, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and in particular, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism.*

The Westminster Confession of Faith was written between 1643-1646 in England and reflects the doctrinal and ecclesiological convictions common in the Presbyterian and Reformed faith tradition. This confession of faith positions the church as God's ordinary agent for redemption in society and gives it a calling which directly imitates that of its Savior, Jesus Christ. This is clearly seen in *Shorter Catechism* question and answer #88.

> Q. 88. *What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?*
> A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption are, his ordinances, especially the Word,

sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.[20]

According to the Westminster Assembly, at the heart of the work of the church is the communication of the benefits of redemption: the preaching and teaching of the word of God, the administration of the sacraments and prayerful communion with God. Since these practices are at the heart of the church's ministry it is safe to assume that the role of a pastor, at least in the eyes of *Westminster*, is to ensure that these core practices are being faithfully pursued in the congregation in which he serves.

However, the Westminster Assembly did not intend to suggest that these were the only practical measures of effective ecclesial ministry.[21] Therefore, in reflecting on the complicated challenges of transition from the ministry of a founding pastor to the immediate successor pastor, one must also consider the ways that these core ministry practices are worked out in real life modern churches.

In order to do this, is it best to create a list of best personal pastoral practices, as suggested by Art Rainer or, conversely, to focus efforts on examining the broader topic of what a local church must do to be faithful and effective in its general calling?[22]

---

[20] The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms As Adopted By the Presbyterian Church in America with Proofs Texts* (Lawrenceville, GA.: Christian Education & Publications, 2007).

[21] Chapters 20-33 of the WCF address a range of issues that fall under the general heading of "applied theology" and as such fall within the functional purview of a minister's job description as far as he is expected to educate and exhort the congregation in putting these principles into practice.

[22] Art Rainer, "*8 Practices That Effective Ministry Leaders Follow*," Art Rainer (blog), December 3, 2014, http://www.artrainer.com/8-practices-that-effective-ministry-leaders-follow/.

Both approaches have their merit, but this paper will focus more on the latter of these two alternatives since a pastor's calling is to see to the ministry of the church as a whole. In this view a pastor's core ministry duties will closely overlap with the church's overall biblical priorities. Once these have been established, this paper will then explore the role of a founding pastor in shaping these core ministry practices, a church session in maintaining and overseeing them, a successor pastor in adapting them, and a congregation in responding to any of the differences that might emerge in the process.

The literature on best practices in pastoral ministry is extensive to say the least, so this paper will concentrate on the counsel of modern pastors and scholars within the broad reformation tradition who have either initiated a new church themselves, been asked to carry on the work of someone else who had done so, or spent significant time researching the matter of pastoral transition.

Beginning in the twentieth century context, Eugene Peterson, founding pastor of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland, provides an ethereal definition of the church's calling.

In his much-loved book, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, Peterson breaks down the work of the church's ministry into five categories: prayer-directing, story-making, pain-sharing, nay-saying, and community-building.[23] These categories reflect Peterson's twenty-nine years dedicated to the ministry of the local church.

Another person who dedicated his life to pastoral ministry and the work of the local church was Don MacNair, former adjunct professor at Covenant Theological

---

[23] Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).

Seminary and highly sought church consultant. MacNair forged his convictions in the context of succeeding the great pastor-apologist Francis Schaeffer in the pulpit of the Covenant Presbyterian Church in St. Louis.

In his book, *The Practices of a Healthy Church*, MacNair argued that all the healthy churches he studied possessed the following characteristics: commitment to holy scripture; vibrant worship; shepherd leadership; ministry organization; strategic planning; and prayerful seeking of the grace of God.[24]

Even more recently a number of still active reformed pastor-scholars have suggested their own ideas regarding the core ministry practices of a local church. One such pastor is Randy Pope, the founding pastor of Perimeter Church in Atlanta.

In *The Intentional Church*, Pope identifies seven essential practices of the church: A biblical-theological polity; the presence and practice of spiritual disciplines leading to renewal in the body; a spiritual, discerning, and gifted leadership; a ministry-oriented laity; always improving facilities; adequate financial resources; and an effective ministry plan.[25] One can quickly see that Pope adjusts the philosophical categories suggested by other contributors into more practical categories.

Perhaps the greatest practitioner of a vibrant, reformed, urban church is Tim Keller. Keller founded Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan in 1989 and retired

---

[24] Donald MacNair and Esther Meek, *The Practices of a Healthy Church: Biblical Strategies for Vibrant Church Life and Ministry* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1999), 10-11.

[25] Randy Pope and John Maxwell, *The Intentional Church: Moving From Church Success to Community Transformation*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2006), 32-35.

from the role of senior pastor in 2017. Keller is noted for his ability to connect the ministry of the church to a post-modern and missional urban context.

In his book, *Center Church,* he notes six marks of effective missional churches. They: confront society's idols; skillfully contextualize the gospel; call all believers to mission in every area of life; exhibit a counter-cultural, servant-oriented community; call people to engagement in the church community; and practice Christian unity.[26] Some have criticized Keller for an overly urbanized vision of the church.[27] However, there is no doubt that Keller has been effective in his own context and in spawning other effective urban churches both in the United States and around the world.[28]

Moving out of the PCA, Mark Dever is a strong representative voice regarding church health from within the Reformed Baptist community. He is founder of a ministry called 9Marks, whose purpose it is to "equip church leaders with a biblical vision and practical resources for displaying God's glory to the nations through healthy churches."[29]

The name for Dever's ministry is derived directly from the nine marks that he considers to be absolutely foundational for church health: preaching, biblical theology, the gospel, conversion, evangelism, membership, discipline, discipleship and leadership.[30]

---

[26] Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).

[27] Carl R. Trueman, "*Why Do We Draw the Line*?," Ligonier Ministries, July 1, 2012, https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/why-do-we-draw-the-line/.

[28] "Our Vision," Redeemer Presbyterian Church, "Redeemer City to City," https://www.redeemercitytocity.com/about/.

[29] Mark Dever, "*About 9Marks*," 9Marks, https://9marks.org/about/.

[30] Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (3rd ed., Wheaton: IL, Crossway, 2013).

Some of Devers marks could be combined to form a more concise list, but he argues

strongly for their uniqueness in *The Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*.

Moving slightly outside the reformed camp, the voices of Craig Ott and Gene

Wilson provide a widely adopted practical guide for current day church planters. They

suggest that the practices at the heart of the work of the church should be: worship,

evangelism and mission; teaching and edification; service and community impact;

fellowship; and governance and leadership.[31] Ott and Wilson's list, contained in *Global

Church Planting*, is fairly generic, but it does create clearly defined core categories for

assessing core ministries, and it has the added benefit of presenting itself as a guide for

those seeking to plant healthy churches.

In the world of evangelical non-denominationalism, there is no more important

voice than that of John MacArthur. MacArthur has pastored Grace Community Church in

Southern California since 1969.

MacArthur's list of critical church practices is longer than any noted so far as he

names some categories not considered by other writers. He lists twelve critical factors:

godly leaders; functional goals and objectives; discipleship; penetrating the community;

active church members; concern for one another; devotion to the family; Bible teaching

and preaching; a willingness to change; great faith; sacrifice; and worshiping God.[32]

---

[31] Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting* (Grand Rapids: MI, Baker Publishing Group, 2011).

[32] As referenced in Mark Dever, "Prescription for a Healthy Church," *Ministry Today Magazine*, http://ministrytodaymag.com/index.php/ministry-today-archives/66-unorganized/831-prescription-for-a-healthy-church.

While additional lists of proposed core ministry practices could be provided, many would be quite similar to those already sampled. Therefore, in considering the lists provided above it is important to establish basic criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of pastoral ministry and shape the questions required to discover translatable principles for making initial transitions smoother than they might otherwise be.

To do this, all these lists can be distilled into the four most commonly listed ministry practices (highlighted in gray in the table): preaching; pastoral care within the congregation; leadership/strategic planning; and outreach or equipping the congregation for community engagement.[33]

Table 1: Core Ministry Practices								
	WCF	Peterson	McNair	Pope	Keller	Dever	Ott/Wilson	Macarthur
Preaching	Word	Story-Making	Faithful to Scripture			Preaching the Gospel	Edification	Preaching and Teaching
Sacraments	Sacraments							
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer-Directing	Prayerful seeking of God					
Pastoral Care		Pain-Sharing			Engagement in the Church		Fellowship	Concern for One Another
Apologetics		Nay-Saying			Confronting Societal Idols			
Worship			Vibrant Worship				Worship	Worship
Leadership, Planning			Shepherd Leadership, Strategic Planning	Spiritual Leadership, Ministry Planning		Leadership	Leadership, Governance	Objectives
Discipleship				Discipleship		Discipleship		Discipleship
Outreach				Lay-Equipping	Community Engagement	Evangelism	Evangelism	Penetrating Community
Facilities				Improving Facilities				
Finances				Financial Resourcing				
Unity					Christian Unity			
Family								Devotion to Family
Change								Willingness to Change

---

[33] Note that in the following chart, some of these author's statements are grouped into one of the broad ministry categories down the left column on the table, since each author uses his own wording.

19

This study will seek the keys for discerning a healthy transition from a founding pastor to the immediate successor by exploring the following four key ministry areas:

1. How did the founding pastor conduct the preaching ministry of the church?

2. How did the founding pastor provide pastoral care among the congregation?

3. How did the founding pastor lead and strategize for the future?

4. How did the founding pastor equip the body for community engagement?

Initial Transition in the Bible

Having established the criteria for assessing critical ministry practices in the local church setting, this review now turns to the scriptures.

There are a number of great and important leaders of God's people in the scriptures. One might think of Adam, the federal head of all humanity or Noah, uniquely called to lead through the tumult of the flood. One could look to Abraham, the originator of the nation of Israel and the first receiver of God's specific covenant promises. Moving forward in the nation's history stand David, the model of a godly king, and Elijah, the prophet par excellence. Even the exile of the nation produced two great leaders, Daniel and Nehemiah.

In the context of the New Testament, John the Baptist, Peter, James--the pastor of the church at Jerusalem--and the Lord Jesus Christ himself provided leadership throughout the founding years of the worldwide church. Of particular note in the New Testament is the work of the Apostle Paul who established a number of new churches and

who handed off each of these churches to a first successor pastor in Titus on the Island of Crete and Timothy in Ephesus.[34]

However, this study is concerned most about transitions at paradigm-shifting moments, moving from an original spiritual leader to an initial successor.[35] Therefore, the most fruitful areas of exploration are the transitions from Moses, the original leader of the nation of Israel, to Joshua, his immediate successor as he brought the nation into the land of inheritance; and Samuel, the last judge of Israel, to Saul, the first king of Israel.

From Moses to Joshua

The greatest human figure of the Old Testament was Moses. His greatness is attested to in several places but perhaps no more powerfully than by the fact that he was one of the two men appointed by Christ to stand with him at his transfiguration.[36] But New Testament attestation to Moses' unique place does not cease there. The author of Hebrews demonstrates that Christ was greater than even Moses, underlining the fact that many Jews, even those expressing affinity with the early Christian church, needed to be

---

[34] Titus 1:5 and I Timothy 1:3.

[35] I determined not to study the transition from Abraham to Isaac as it was essentially a family transition and the biblical data is limited. I determined not to study the transition of Jesus as the founder of the church to Peter as Jesus is the divine God-man and Peter is only a man. I wrestled with whether to study the relationships of Paul with Titus and Timothy as they were both relevant to the topic at hand. However, as I made an initial survey of the scriptural data it seemed to me that these transition stories lacked the narrative detail of those relationships between Moses and Joshua and Samuel and Saul. I would however like to revisit the Pastoral Epistles to strengthen transition principles at a later time.

[36] Matthew 17:3.

shown that there was indeed someone greater than Moses in order to develop the confidence for them to fully relinquish their hearts to the messiah, Jesus Christ.[37]

Though Moses was but a man, he was given extraordinary affirmations of his foundational leadership position by the hand of God himself. Even his birth came about as the result of God's immediate and direct intervention in the preservation of his sovereign plan to establish his people.[38] Of this, the Old Testament commentator R. Alan Cole notes, "As in the New Testament, God's chosen agent is protected: neither Pharaoh nor Herod can stand in the way of God's plan."[39]

Preceding Moses' birth, Pharaoh had issued an edict commanding the Hebrew midwives to put to death all the Hebrew boys born in his realm.[40] However, as Cole observes, "No eastern mother could bring herself to abandon a sturdy boy-baby like this. We may suspect that a girl-baby might not have fared so well, but they did not come under the Pharaoh's decree of execution. In all of this, God's providence was at work."[41] The baby-boy, Moses, was discovered by none other than one of Pharaoh's own daughters, thus affirming God's special purpose for him.[42]

---

[37] Hebrews 3:1-6.

[38] Exodus 1:15-2:4.

[39] R. Alan Cole, *Exodus*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 1981), 56.

[40] Exodus 1:15-16.

[41] Cole, *Exodus*, 58.

[42] Exodus 2:5-10.

Moses' subsequent escape from the Egyptian authorities and his later sojourn in the wilderness stand as further evidence that God was doing something extraordinarily purposeful in his life.[43] That said, as the late J.A. Motyer notes, "How could Moses, no matter how 'great' he was in Egypt, singlehandedly tackle and overthrow all the power of Pharaoh upon his throne?" He then adds, "Moses, who humanly speaking, had 'messed the whole thing up,' found safety, home, and family awaiting him, made ready by a gracious but yet undeclared providence."[44]

After many years of exile, Moses' call to ministry at the burning bush highlights once again God's unique design for this man.[45] "It was," as Motyer observes, "during the encounter with the awesome and holy angel of the Lord that Moses learned what his life mission was to be. The task set before him by God was 'to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.'"[46]

Moving beyond his early years, he gradually developed an intimate relationship with God that continued to the end of his life when, in Exodus 33, God spoke "face to face" with Moses.[47] Cole comments that God's speaking "face to face" with Moses indicates that "God will speak to Moses 'mouth to mouth,' that is to say, not in dreams

---

[43] Exodus 2:11-15.

[44] J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus: The Days of Our Pilgrimage* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 40–41.

[45] Exodus 3:1-2.

[46] Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 54–55.

[47] Exodus 33:11.

and visions, but clearly and directly."[48] J.I. Durham adds: "As the second of these narratives makes clear, 'face to face' is here to be understood as an idiom of intimacy."[49]

So great was God's affection for Moses that he blessed him with a profoundly intimate companionship throughout his life, as well as the utterly unique honor of a burial ceremony undertaken by his own divine hand![50]

Throughout his ministry, Moses was used by God in a way different than any other leader of the nation before or since.[51] And all this in spite of the fact that he was not a perfect man as demonstrated not only by his ill-advised murder of the Egyptian taskmaster but also by his direct disobedience of God at Meribah, a transgression that would cost him the blessing of entering into the promised land.[52]

Despite this, the words of Deuteronomy 34:10-12 affirm that Moses was a man like no other:

> And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, none like him for all the signs and the wonders that the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, and for all the mighty power and all the great deeds of terror that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.

---

[48] Cole, *Exodus*, 224.

[49] John I. Durham, *Exodus,* Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 443.

[50] Deuteronomy 34:1-8.

[51] Exodus 3 through Deuteronomy.

[52] Numbers 20:10-13.

Concerning the juxtaposition of this affirmation and Moses' being banned from entering the promised land, Christopher Wright, the International Director of the Langham Partnership and a noted Old Testament scholar, writes:

> Centuries of Jewish reflection on Moses' death outside the land have produced various explanations. One interesting view is that the scriptures had to emphasize the mortality of Moses in order to balance the emphasis through the Pentateuch (and especially through Deuteronomy) on his closeness to God. There was a danger that he (Moses)...might come to be unduly venerated.[53]

Based on the contents of the New Testament book of Hebrews, it seems that Wright's concerns did indeed come to pass in the later history of the Jews.

Because of his relationship with God, one might think that Moses was a man puffed up with pride, thinking himself better and smarter than any of his peers. And yet, because of the regular frustrations he encountered in trying to lead the people, he repeatedly proved that he was humble and open to guidance. This is no better illustrated than in his gracious and affable response to his father-in-law Jethro's critique of his model of leadership during Israel's sojourn in the wilderness.[54]

Of this encounter, Cole says, "Moses was humble enough and wise enough to learn from his father-in-law...meekness was the great distinguishing quality of Moses."[55] As Cole later underlines, as the original leader of the nation of Israel, Moses was specially called, highly gifted, and extraordinarily humble.

---

[53] Christopher J.H. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, Understanding the Bible Commentary. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books. 1994), 312, Kindle.

[54] Exodus 18.

[55] Cole, *Exodus*, 142.

Moses' meekness was instrumental in the challenging process of leadership transition soon to follow. The Lord understood the unique position he had called Moses to occupy as the liberator and first leader of the nation of Israel, and so, well before his tenure leading the people was to come to a close, the Lord entrusted Moses with the news that it would be Joshua who would succeed him.[56] Of this critical news, Wright notes, "The mention of Joshua as his successor here at the beginning of the book (of Deuteronomy), linking up with the full description of it at the end, adds to the effect of the whole book standing as the 'last will and testament' of Moses."[57]

However, even though Joshua was the one who was to succeed Moses, it is also clear that God had ordained an extended period of time between the revelation of Joshua's successorship and Moses' disclosure of God's ultimate plan for that succession to the people.[58]

God's revelation to Moses, accompanied with the great gift of humility he had been given, guided Moses throughout the journey of Israel in the wilderness since, on multiple occasions, he is giving opportunities to other godly men, often much younger than himself, to participate in the leadership of the nation, including his eventual successor Joshua.

---

[56] Deuteronomy 1:38; 3:28.

[57] Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 32.

[58] From Deuteronomy 3 thru to Deuteronomy 31.

Lorin Woolfe, who writes on the intersection of faith and business, observes, "This was not an easy hand-off for Moses, but he handled it in a mature manner," something that many original leaders have struggled to do.[59]

As Tichy, a frequent writer on transition in business, observes, real leaders understand that they must intentionally develop new leaders and therefore put people "in progressively more difficult situations where they have to make decisions, and then give them feedback and support."[60] Thus, Moses gave Joshua the special military duty of leading the Israelites into battle against the Amalekites.[61]

Joshua, while becoming a capable military leader, was also entrusted with quasi-ecclesial duties such as tending to the tent of meeting.[62,63] Woolfe explains, "In the Bible, anyone who wished to lead needed to be properly instructed, but the closest thing to a seminar room was the tent in which Moses mentored Joshua."[64] He adds, "Moses wasn't just 'teaching skills,' he was grooming Joshua to lead the tribes of Israel."[65]

Later, as the Israelites approached the promised land, Moses, with God's guidance, gave opportunities to each of the nation's tribal leaders to extend his own

[59] Lorin Woolfe, *The Bible on Leadership: From Moses to Matthew -- Management Lessons for Contemporary Leaders* (New York: AMACOM, 2002), 214. Woolfe conveys stories of many founding corporate leaders who refused to hand over the baton of leadership when it was time (See Wolfe, 214-215).

[60] Noel M. Tichy, *The Leadership Engine* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2002), 85.

[61] Exodus 17:9ff Durham notes that the insertion of Joshua's name in this passage is "abrupt" but that he is presented as "the military leader he came to be." Durham, *Exodus*, 235.

[62] Durham indicates that the meaning of the term "tending" is closer to "guarding." Durham, *Exodus*, 443.

[63] Exodus 33:11.

[64] Woolfe, *The Bible on Leadership,* 205.

[65] Woolfe, *The Bible on Leadership,* 201.

leadership and spy out the land. [66] Among them were his young protege Joshua and another young man named Caleb.

Woolfe makes note that "Moses realized that if Joshua was to lead the nation of Israel, he needed a series of progressively responsible developmental assignments. One of these was to lead a reconnaissance mission to explore the promised land prior to invading it."[67] In this episode, both of these younger men (Joshua and Caleb) distinguished themselves as faithful servants of the Lord and their leader, Moses, when they returned to give their report of what they had seen.[68] Woolfe adds, "(Joshua's) leadership skills would be further developed as he tried to convince the majority of the people that this task could be accomplished and that they should not give up by returning to Egypt."[69] History records that Joshua was unsuccessful in this effort, yet his willingness to stand up in front of the nation to advocate for his convictions surely impacted his future development as a leader in waiting.[70]

The journey in the wilderness was long, but at each stage Moses, in obedience to his calling as the original leader of the nation of Israel, was grooming Joshua to succeed him. Tichy underlines this critical aspect of Moses' calling: "A person may have all the

---

[66] Numbers 13.

[67] Woolfe, *The Bible on Leadership*, 206.

[68] Numbers 14:6-10.

[69] Woolfe, *The Bible on Leadership,* 206.

[70] Numbers 14:10.

traits of a leader, but if he or she doesn't personally see to the development of new leaders, the organization won't be sustainable."[71]

Eventually, when Moses finally did announce Joshua's role to the nation, he made clear that the Lord would lead the people and not any one man.[72] As Wright observes, "The first point Moses makes in his transfer speech is to reassure the people that the Lord your God Himself will cross over ahead of Israel into the land. Their survival and success depend on God's leadership; their victories will be God's."[73]

Nevertheless, the Lord pressed Moses to publicly mark the transition of leadership from him, as their great founding leader, to his initial successor, so before he died the Lord commissioned and charged Joshua as the successor-leader of God's people.[74]

Even as Moses' life was drawing to a close, to further affirm Joshua's leadership, he was given the honor of standing next to Moses as he recited his extraordinary song, thus providing an undeniable symbol of his leadership role among the people of God.[75]

Moses was inspired by the Lord to play an active part in the critical transition from his leadership to that of his successor, Joshua, and in large part, the tremendously complex leadership handoff between them went as smoothly as possible.

---

[71] Tichy, *The Leadership Engine*, 43.

[72] Deuteronomy 31:3.

[73] Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 294.

[74] Deuteronomy 31:14ff.

[75] Deuteronomy 32:44.

From Samuel to Saul

Another fascinating original transition in the Old Testament takes place during the transition from the judges to the kings of Israel.[76]

After having been in the promised land for almost 400 years, the nation of Israel had become a sinful mess, vacillating back and forth between the worship of Baal and Yahweh. God had sent judges to deliver the people from their sin, but the people's hearts remained hard, growing more and more frustrated with God's way of leading them. The resulting havoc and the changes that were about to occur were prophesied in the final words of the book of Judges. "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."[77] Samuel was to be the last in the long line of judges who had been called to lead an often intransigent and disobedient people.

Like Moses before him, Samuel came into the world under acts of God's special providence. His mother, Hannah, had been unable to have children but had vowed that if God would give her a child, that child would be completely dedicated to God, and so when Samuel was finally born, according to Mary Evans in her commentary on I Samuel, the name he was given appropriately meant, "heard by God."[78,79] The song that Hannah later sang in celebration and thanksgiving for Samuel's birth is not only full of praise but,

---

[76] The events related to this massive shift in the nation's leadership paradigm are covered in the biblical books of Judges and 1 and 2 Samuel, roughly covering a period of time from 1150-1025 B.C.

[77] Judges 21:25.

[78] 1 Samuel 1:11.

[79] Mary J. Evans, *The Message of Samuel: Personalities, Potential, Politics and Power,* The Bible Speaks Today Commentary Series*,* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2004), 28.

according to David Firth, one of the first precursors of God's intention to introduce a king.[80] "Yahweh will judge the ends of the earth, but he will do so through his king, exalting the 'horn' of his anointed. At this stage we do not know who the king will be, but Judges 17-21 has prepared readers for the likelihood of kingship."[81]

Samuel eventually arrived in the service of the temple under the priesthood of Eli between the ages of three and five and therefore, "The fact that he was a special child who had been dedicated to God would have been known to Samuel from his first consciousness" but perhaps did not become abundantly clear, like Moses, until he experienced his own miraculous calling.[82,83] Evans adds that "from this time on his relationship with God was close and constant."[84]

Israel, after Samuel's birth and calling, had continued in a chaotic and warring state for about twenty years, continuously oppressed by the neighboring Philistines until finally, now having become a young man, Samuel reappears on the scene as a priest-judge and assumes leadership of the nation.[85] For a season, real spiritual progress occurred in the land, but as the nation begins to anticipate the transition from Samuel's leadership to whoever would follow him, they note that his sons, Joel and Abijah, are not

---

[80] 1 Samuel 2:1-11.

[81] David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel,* Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Nottingham, England: IVP Academic, 2009), 61.

[82] Evans, *The Message of Samuel*, 29.

[83] 1 Samuel 3:1-14.

[84] Evans, *The Message of Samuel*, 40.

[85] 1 Samuel 7:3ff.

worthy due to their own corruption.[86] The story is recounted in I Samuel 8:4-5. "Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah and said to him, 'Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations.'"

Evans notes, "These elder's actions can be seen as a credit to Samuel's ministry. They ask the right questions, and their main motivation seems to be to find a way forward for Israel that will enable them to live rightly as God's covenant people."[87]

I Samuel 8:6-9 sits at the hinge of one of the most significant moments in Israel's history as a nation and reveals the radical change being sought.

> But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." And Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.

The people had cast the jealous gaze of their hearts on the nations around them as they grew weary of the theocracy that had preserved them from the earliest days of their nation, and the evidence of the text suggests that Samuel had taken personal offense.

Firth submits that the Lord's perspective on the people's request might not have been as negative as Samuel, who felt as if it was he who was being rejected, thought.

---

[86] 1 Samuel 8:1.

[87] Evans, *The Message of Samuel*, 55.

"The larger question may be what type of monarchy was acceptable, and it is there that Samuel and the people differed. In resolving this dilemma, Yahweh supports neither Samuel nor the people, even as he accedes to their request."[88] Conversely, Evans takes a more negative view of the people's request concluding, "We can't avoid the implication that they thought that trust in God was not quite enough."[89]

Wherever one might come down on this issue, though Samuel grieved the wayward hearts of the people, he entrusted himself to the Lord, as he guided them in the transition from the rule of judges and into the rule of kings.[90] Evans notes:

> In this case their dependence was on kingship as a system of government which they perceived to have been at the heart of the success of other nations. They may not have been intending to turn away from God, but they had failed to understand who God was, or the extent of his sovereignty and power.[91]

Before Yahweh acquiesces to their request, he instructs Samuel to warn them of its dangers. As Firth explains, "Samuel's speech about the justice of the king is not therefore a description of what a monarchy was meant to be in Israel, but rather what it would be if the elders achieved their intention."[92] In verses 19-20, the people flatly reject the warning and unswervingly press their own agenda. "But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, 'No! But there shall be a king over us, that we also

---

[88] Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 112.

[89] Evans, *The Message of Samuel*, 57.

[90] 1 Samuel 8:6-22.

[91] Evans, *The Message of Samuel*, 58–59.

[92] Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 116.

may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.'"

In response, God grants them their request by giving them a man named Saul. The author of 1 Samuel repeatedly makes the point that God was giving them the kind of king they wanted as the narrative of Saul's calling and initial actions as king unfold. For instance, in I Samuel 9:1-2 we can see that Israel's interests were tuned to the external and not to the heart:

> There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish, the son of Abiel, son of Zeror, son of Becorath, son of Aphiah, a Benjaminite, a man of wealth. And he had a son whose name was Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people.[93]

Baldwin observes that "Kish, the father of Saul, was a man of wealth" but clarifies, "The last phrase hardly does justice to the Hebrew, *gibbor hayil*, which implies much more: 'a mighty man of power.' His long genealogy testifies to a family of importance in Benjamin, and his son Saul had the added advantage of unusually tall stature and extra good looks."[94]

Clearly, because Israel had become unrighteous, self-consumed, and desirous of fine outward appearances, just like all the other nations, they were given a king from a wealthy family and who outwardly looked like a king. In the earlier considered leadership

---

[93] 1 Samuel 9:1-2.

[94] Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel,* Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 87.

transition from Moses to Joshua, nowhere in the Pentateuch was the outward appearance or wealth of Joshua or his family noted.

As Saul comes on the scene Baldwin makes another important observation. "One puzzling, often-noted feature of the story is Saul's ignorance of Samuel."[95] Apparently, Samuel and Saul didn't even know one another! This detail also stands in stark contrast to Joshua's intimate relationship with Moses, his predecessor.

Early on, even before he was publicly declared to be king, Saul's character flaws became increasingly evident as he deliberately neglected to follow the instruction of the prophet Samuel and withheld the whole truth of what he had been asked to do from his uncle.[96] Later in that same chapter at the time for his anointing as king, almost comically, Saul is found cowering among the luggage.[97] Baldwin, almost excusing of Saul's actions, comments:

> Why did he hide? He had time to prepare himself for this moment but
> seems not to have been able to see himself in the role of the
> king...Reluctantly, he revealed himself to be of outstanding physique,
> and therefore acceptable to the people as their leader, but he did not want
> to be king.[98]

Evans then underlines the irony of Saul's calling against the later calling of David. "The writer is almost certainly aware of the irony here as it is made very clear

---

[95] Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 88.

[96] 1 Samuel 10:1-16.

[97] 1 Samuel 10:22.

[98] Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 94.

when David is chosen that the Lord is not influenced by outward appearances."[99] Again, reflecting on the earlier story of the transition between Moses and Joshua, Saul's cowardly and incompetent early actions as king stand in stark contrast with the faithfulness and bravery of Joshua as he was being trained up by Moses.

Saul's kingship begins auspiciously with a victory in battle, which leads Samuel to abruptly announce his retirement from leadership.[100] What follows in chapter 12 is Samuel's farewell speech, which is designed to vindicate his judgeship and by the end of which the people "were completely convinced that not only was God powerful but that asking for a king had been a bad move."[101] As his words unfold, Samuel, unlike Moses with Joshua, does little to boost the prospects of Saul, and Saul, as can be seen from the events of his early reign, is shown to be completely out of his depth.

Saul's reign is recounted in the remainder of I Samuel but what clearly emerges is a portrait of a man whose leadership is marked by his own lack of spiritual obedience, anxiety, fear, and insecurity, leading eventually to great grief in the heart of both Samuel and the Lord and the eventual rejection of Saul as king.[102] The emotion evident in the moment that Saul comes to this realization is vividly recounted in I Samuel 15:24-29.

> Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may bow before the Lord." And Samuel said to Saul, "I will not return with you. For you have rejected the word of the Lord, and

---

[99] Evans, *The Message of Samuel*, 73.

[100] 1 Samuel 11.

[101] Evans, *The Message of Samuel*, 83.

[102] 1 Samuel 13:8ff; 16:14; 17:11; 18:11.

the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel." As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt of his robe, and it tore. And Samuel said to him, "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you.

Of this account, Baldwin captures Saul's angst and embarrassment as he comes to grip with his rejection:

> By this time Saul was thoroughly awake to the implications of his rejection, and when Samuel turned to leave him, Saul grabbed and tore the prophet's robe in an attempt to salvage some shred of his reputation. Samuel's torn garment provided a vivid picture of the kingdom torn from Saul, and to be given to a neighbor more worthy of it.[103]

However, following his rejection and David's anointing, God ordained that Saul's kingship would continue for a season, while his successor, David, was made ready to pick up the pieces of Saul's broken empire. David's anointing is full of prophetic irony in that, while also handsome, he bore none of the imposing physical traits of his predecessor.[104,105]

What follows in the remainder of I Samuel is a sad and sordid tale of a rejected leader who refused to acquiesce to the will of the Lord in facilitating a smooth transition to his own eventual successor David, thus resulting not only in his own death but also the death of his noble son Jonathan and many other faithful Israelites.[106]

---

[103] Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 116.

[104] 1 Samuel 16.

[105] 1 Samuel 16:7, 12.

[106] 1 Samuel 31.

In reviewing these two stories of initial transition, scholars note that whereas Moses and Joshua were able to affect a healthy leadership transition, Samuel and Saul were not. The essential health of the Moses-to-Joshua transition has much to do with the groundwork laid by Moses in recognizing the need to prepare for transition, his mentoring of Joshua during the period of transition, and the earnest and humble spiritual disposition of both men as the process unfolded.

The failure of the Samuel to Saul transition has much to do with the fact that Samuel had failed to properly prepare his own sons to assume leadership of the nation after he was gone, his uneven endorsement of Saul as his successor, and Saul's unwillingness to fully depend on God as he made his way into his new leadership role.

Common Grace Principles for Transition from the Stepfamily Experience

Moving beyond the context of scripture, the doctrines of general revelation and common grace enable Christians to explore the issue of transition in contexts other than the scripture and history of the church.

The Family as it Relates to the Church

One rich vein of comparison is that of the church and the family. Biblically speaking, the church is regularly compared to families.

To begin with one of the most foundational descriptions of God's relationship to his people is of that of a Father.[107] A father, in scripture, acts as a covenant head over their family and as such is given grave and important leadership responsibilities just as a pastor is called to provide spiritual leadership to his own flock.

A second key area of comparison is that of the church to marriage.[108] Marriage provides a powerful illustration of the original relationship of God (the groom) and his church (the bride). In this regard, pastors of local churches are called to use this profound illustration to help their people understand God's enduring love for his flock.

Third, we note that requirements for church leadership are closely connected to how an elder performs in his familial duties in the home.[109] Elders in the local church are required to be effective husbands and fathers if they would serve in the church. Failures in the context of the home necessitate prayerful and thoughtful consideration of whether an elder is equipped to take on leadership of the body of the local church.

Fourth, we see that both Peter and Paul borrow family imagery such as "household of faith" or "household of God" in describing small bodies of believers.[110] In fact, in many cases the early assemblies of believers were little more than house churches.[111]

---

[107] Psalm 89:26; Isaiah 9:6; Matthew 6:6; John. 1:18; Ephesians 1:2.

[108] Ephesians 5:22-33; Revelation 19:7.

[109] I Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

[110] Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:19; I Peter 4:17.

[111] Acts 11, 16, 18; I Corinthians 16:15.

Finally, and perhaps most notably, are the almost 200 occurrences in the New Testament in which fellow believers are referred to using familial imagery like brother and sister.[112]

Family Systems

Since the church is regularly compared to the family, then it may be of value in our consideration of transition in a local church setting to explore the dynamics in play in a family system.

Every family is a unique organic system with its own organizational dynamics. Herrington describes the kinds of relationships that exist in families:

> Whenever you engage in a relationship that is long term, intense, and significant, you become emotionally connected to one another in a living system. Each person who is a part of this interaction begins to affect and be affected by the anxiety and behaviors of the others.[113]

Edwin Friedman drills into the unique dynamics in all organizations, including families, by comparing them to triangles. "Emotional triangles are the building blocks of any relationship system. They are its molecules." He then adds, "Emotional triangles form because of the inherent instability of two-person relationships. This instability increases because of a lack of differentiation of the partners, the degree of chronic

---

[112] Romans 10:1; Hebrews 3:1; I Corinthians 7:15; Philemon 1:2.

[113] Jim Herrington, Robert Creech, and Trisha L. Taylor, *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 29.

anxiety in the surrounding emotional atmosphere, and the absence of well-defined leadership."[114]

Friedman's point is that as a family grows, the number of triangles increase, thus leading to a more and more complex system and more and more potential anxiety. According to Friedman, this observation applies to any organization, including churches.

Family Systems and Stepfamilies

Since family dynamics have significant overlap with those of the local church and since both are complex systems of relationships, then the events that take place when transition occurs in an original nuclear family bear further scrutiny. When that transition involves the departure of an original biological parent, a loss of "well-defined leadership," thru death or divorce, and the entry of a new, non-biological parent, confusion regarding the previous "well-defined leadership" stirs up systemic anxiety and adaptation, as is the case when founding pastors transition leadership to their successors.

Many useful comparisons can be explored. When such transitions take place in the family, there can be grave difficulties for all members of the new stepfamily, just as is the case for all participants in a church facing an original transition.

Ron Deal estimates that "at least one-third of all weddings conducted in America today give birth to a stepfamily (it actually might be closer to 40li-45%)."[115] Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott note the tremendous challenges involved in holding together any marriage

[114] Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), 205.

[115] Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 102.

when they state, "Of the 2.4 million couples who will get married this year in the United States, it is predicted that at least 50% of the marriages will not survive."[116] Once a nuclear family unit is broken, human nature normally compels a widowed or abandoned spouse to seek another marital union, and if children are involved, this marriage leads to the formation of a stepfamily.

One might think that when people marry a second time, they would have figured out what went wrong the first time, but sadly, according to the Parrott's, the statistics don't get better for second marriages, they get worse. Second marriages experience a 60 percent failure rate, as confirmed by Waltz.[117]

One reason for the higher percentage of failures in second marriages is the enormous complexity of navigating the stepfamily experience, which requires the blending of two units that were shaped and formed in other foundational contexts. Deal notes, "Stepfamilies are divided into 'insiders and outsiders,' that is, those who are biologically related and those who aren't."[118] He adds, "However, there is one thing every stepfamily has in common: family members have a history that involved at least one other parent and spouse."[119] This history naturally breeds a comparative dynamic for anyone in the newly created home -- a dynamic, which, according to Deal, occurs

---

[116] Les and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Second Marriage Before It Starts: Nine Questions to Ask Before (and After) You Remarry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 14.

[117] Samantha Waltz, ed., *Blended: Writers on the Stepfamily Experience* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2015), xiii. "More than half the families in America are living in step. Some work beautifully but more than 60% are torn with conflict and will end in dissolution."

[118] Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 109.

[119] Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 11.

because the dynamics surrounding a second marriage are radically different from those surrounding a first.

> For a stepfamily, a wedding is not the beginning, it's the middle. Stepfamilies are born out of the loss of previous family relationships; that is, they are created when a marriage follows death, divorce or an out of wedlock birth. This loss creates a paradox of emotions for the new stepfamily: hand in hand with joy and hope linger sadness and grief.[120]

Experts in the dynamics experienced by stepfamilies affirm that all of the roles in a stepfamily are full of complex challenges.

Stepchild Challenges

According to Deal, the difficulties that stepchildren experience during seasons of family transition are manifold. "If you are going to understand stepchildren (whether still living at home or adults on their own), you have to understand the impact of loss, loyalty, and emotional attachment on their lives."[121]

The end of the nuclear family brings with it a great sense of grief and loss. As Samantha Waltz notes in her book, *Blended: Writers from the Stepfamily Experience,* the very root of the word "step" connotes grief. "Part of every stepfamily member's memories and even his or her heart is often in another home. The words stepfather,

---

[120] Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 227.

[121] Ron L. Deal, *The Smart Stepdad: Steps to Help You Succeed* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2011), 53.

stepmother, and stepchild exist in Old English forms related to the word "astieped,"

meaning, 'bereaved.'"[122]

Deal confirms this, saying: "No one in a stepfamily experiences more loss than

children."[123] So, "If you are a parent, you need to understand the impact that loss has on

your children. If you are a stepparent, you need to empathize with--not resent--your

stepchildren's grief."[124]

But grief isn't the only dynamic in play in a stepfamily, it is a part of a critical

complex of emotions in a child's life which requires them to not only work through their

grief but to consider their loyalties and the potential claims against these loyalties that

may require significant changes in the way they experience their families. Maxine

Marsolini, a Christian counselor and author who also works on family issues, notes:

> Change alters the familiar. Sometimes it exchanges a known quantity for
> an unknown one. Other times it only modifies, giving a fresh look, as a
> coat of paint does to the exterior of my home. Change can be a scary
> thing, a fine thing, a sad thing or a welcome breeze on a hot afternoon. It
> enters our lives accompanied by an array of emotions.[125]

Deal adds the following list of difficulties to those experienced by stepchildren:

they change residences; are forced to move between two homes; inherit a new stepparent

they didn't ask for; grieve the death of the dream of parental reconciliation; have new

---

[122] Waltz, *Blended,* xi.

[123] Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 238.

[124] Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 239.

[125] Maxine Marsolini, *Blended Families: Creating Harmony as You Build a New Home Life* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2000), 12.

stepsiblings forced on them; often must share a room; lose their role in the family; have to incorporate changed traditions; are compelled to adapt to new rules and expectations.[126]

These observations are confirmed when one reviews the reflections of real-life stepchildren like those compiled by Waltz. One example is from a woman named Aliana who writes of her experience as a child of divorce who became a stepchild:

> It was as if I stepped onto a merry-go-round spinning at top speed; looking out at my life, I was dizzy and disoriented by the familiar images turned into a confusing blur...As I tried to adjust to new stepparents who were such opposites of my mom and dad, I struggled to reconcile the differences between my changed reality and my expectations about how things were supposed to work.[127]

Aliana's testimony hints at the third component so central to the experience of becoming a stepchild, the emotional attachments that have developed in their lives and how these old attachments may need to be altered in the formation of the new, especially in the area of altered parental expectations.

Waltz conveys the reflections of another stepchild named Gigi who both playfully and broodingly remembered the different sets of expectations in the two homes she lived in as a stepchild:

> At my father's house I drank 'Black Cows' made from Coca Cola and milk. Soda was forbidden at my mother's house. My father took me to the zoo, we rode the Central Park carousel, and he always bought me Cracker Jacks because I liked the prize. At my mother's house, we lied to everyone, saying that Marvin (my mom's new boyfriend) was my father.[128]

---

[126] My summary of a longer section provided by Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 238.

[127] Waltz, *Blended*, 97.

[128] Waltz, *Blended*, 163.

Another stepchild profiled by Waltz, Jennifer, experienced this same dynamic, but in a more rueful way. She had been prevented by her biological mother from having a pet and taking piano lessons but was now about to get a stepmom who had a different and seemingly more open perspective altogether. "But now (that I was getting a new stepmom) I would get...Street (a dog) and a piano!"[129] This hope caused a great upsurge in emotions for Jennifer, who began to anticipate a far looser and more enjoyable lifestyle in the home of her father and stepmom than what she had experienced in both her original biological home and her primary home with her mother.

Unfortunately, this new stepmother was also a perfectionist, bordering on obsessive-compulsive in regard to her household requirements. Jennifer dolefully remembers an incident shortly after she'd moved into the new stepfamily home in which her new stepmom unleashed her perfectionism on her after she had been asked to do some household cleaning. "Cindy (my new stepmom) took off her glasses to better scrutinize how I sponged the table. 'You missed a spot!'"[130] She remembers that all her grand expectations were wiped out in an instant, and things soured quickly thereafter.

As Deal notes, all of this complexity requires a focused effort on the part of adults in a stepchild's life to help them through this difficult stage. "Because children lack maturity and coping skills, they need more help processing their grief than adults."[131]

---

[129] Waltz, *Blended*, 172.

[130] Waltz, *Blended*, 174.

[131] Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 238.

Remaining Biological Parent Challenges

As Deal notes, second marriages can be haunted by ghosts from defunct first marriages casting long and brooding shadows over the prospects of the new marriage.

Deal covers a range of these ghosts in his book on stepfamilies, noting especially the kinds of fears that enter into the minds of remaining biological parents as they assess their new spouse's entry into the home.[132] These include fears about protecting children from the sins of new stepparents, protecting assets from first marriages for later inheritance by biological children, and sexual comparisons. He further notes challenges for remaining biological parents created by divorce (vulnerability fears, loyalty concerns and defensiveness about practices from a past marriage) and death (expecting a one-to-one replacement of the previous spouse and evaluating the new spouse against the standard of the deceased spouse).[133]

New Stepparent Challenges

The third component of a newly created stepfamily is the new stepparent and the new relationship that must be established with their stepchildren. Doug and Naomi Moseley summarize this difficulty in their book, *Making your Second Marriage a First-Class Success:*

> The bond between the parent and child is one of life's strongest—
> stronger, one might argue, than the bond between the parent and new
> mate. How could it be any other way? The child is born of the parent; the
> child is an extension of the parent's self. This bond has been many years
> in the making, and every natural instinct favors its development.

---

[132] Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 115–17.

[133] My summary of Deal's longer section in *The Smart Stepfamily,* 101-128.

Complex needs have been met through this parent-child relationship over a number of years and then along comes this stranger: the new spouse.[134]

The Moseley's point seems to be that a birth parent makes a profound impact on the life of a child that prevents that same child, even subconsciously, from becoming open to the kind of intimacy required to develop an appropriately deep and trusting relationship with their stepparent.[135] The intense reality of the strength of this bond can leave any new stepparent perplexed, especially given the interdependent nature of these dynamics. Deal records the reflection of one new stepfather: "'I simply didn't have any idea how hard blending a family would be. I lacked any knowledge of how to deal with my step kids.'"[136] When faced with this situation the Moseleys note that a stepparent is left in an ironic situation:

> The stepparent who is committed to the job *(of becoming deeply connected with step children)* is, in fact, left with a major dilemma: Accept the status quo--which means accepting second place, accepting a marriage where the mate is more bonded to the child--and deal with all the consequences of that; or speak up and drag the mate (who is likely to be resistant) more genuinely into the marriage and attend to the work of strengthening the spousal bond. That means challenging a deeply entrenched system and risking the many powerful feelings that will inevitably arise until a new equilibrium is established--the equilibrium of two equal parents present with a child.[137]

---

[134] Doug Moseley and Naomi Moseley, *Making Your Second Marriage a First-Class Success* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 117.

[135] This will become a critical issue for reflection regarding transition to a first successor pastor in the closing chapter of this dissertation.

[136] Deal, *The Smart Stepdad*, 120.

[137] Moseley and Moseley, *Making Your Second Marriage a First-Class Success*, 127.

This complex dynamic of balancing the marital relationship and the new stepparenting relationship is confirmed in principle by Friedman who writes, "What is beneficial to one condition can be harmful to the other."[138]

In an overarching sense, the challenges faced by stepfamilies are identical to those faced by the parties involved when a church must adapt to the circumstances of transition from a founding pastor to the first successor.

Table 2: Comparison of Stepfamily roles to Church family	
Stepfamily Context	**Church Family Context**
Biological Children	Remaining Congregants
Resident Biological Parent	Remaining Session or Church Staff
Non-Resident Biological Parent	Departing Founding Pastor
Stepparent	First Successor Pastor

The challenges experienced by congregants in the midst of an initial pastoral transition are comparable to those faced by children when a new stepparent enters their home. Similarly, the existing biological parent's challenges are akin to those experienced by a session or staff team that must manage the congregation as they remain in the fundamental leadership roles of the church. And finally, the difficulties that a first successor pastor will deal with are comparable to those faced by a new stepparent as they

---

[138] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 105.

learn to relate to both their new spouse (the session) and their new stepchildren (the congregation).

The statistical success rates of second marriages parallel the business and the church in transition, in that both face high rates of failure at this critical juncture.[139]

Common Grace Principles for Transition from the Business Context

Another area of observation for comparison to initial church transition comes from the world of business, and in particular, the worlds of not-for-profit and family business. While a local church is neither a business nor a family, it does share significant overlaps with both, especially regarding organizational dynamics.

Connection of Business to Biblical Family Life

Strong evidence suggests that almost every family in the New Testament era operated, at least in some sense, in the broad context of a family business. For instance, wealthy individuals owned large swaths of property and employed their own family members and residents in their own villages, almost all of whom would've gathered alongside them in the context of their local synagogue to worship God.[140] Thus, when Jesus set out to illustrate important spiritual truths, he regularly borrowed illustrations from the world of work and business.[141]

---

[139] "More than half the families in America are living in step. Some work beautifully but more than 60% are torn with conflict and will end in dissolution." Waltz, *Blended,* xiii.

[140] Luke 15:11-32; Matthew 20:1-16; Acts 4:34.

[141] We see this especially in the parables found in Matthew 13 and Luke 13-16.

Connection of Church Organization to Business

Across the whole swath of scripture, the people of God have had to organize themselves to accomplish their mission. In the Old Testament, as previously touched upon, Jethro provided organizational advice to Moses in Exodus 18. Even the Old Testament Levitical priesthood was set up in tiers that organized and led the functions of the temple and local synagogues.[142] When Ezra and Nehemiah led the people back from captivity, they relied heavily on the ancestral organizational order of the Levitical priesthood to establish a structure for rebuilding the temple and city walls.[143]

In the New Testament, the presence of the "Council" or "Sanhedrin"[144] suggests that the Old Testament system of order had continued to evolve in its organizational dynamics. After the New Testament church had been established, it continued on with a similar polity as its Old Testament forerunner. The council of apostles met in Acts 15, and the apostles occupied the leadership seats once held by the Pharisees and Sadducees, and local congregations had elders the way that each town had elders.[145]

As Paul gradually led the expansion of the New Testament church, he too took polity seriously and urged that every local body of believers organize themselves around specific principles, especially the practice of elders assuming leadership in the absence of

---

[142] 1 Kings 4.

[143] See Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 3.

[144] Matthew 26.

[145] Titus 1:5.

priests.[146] Over time even this order was adapted to provide for the functional office of deacon to improve the manner in which the New Testament church organized itself.[147]

So then, in the New Testament era, Jesus and the apostles used imagery of church, family, and business so the people of God could better understand how they should operate amongst one another.

Churches as Family Businesses

While scholarly research on the topic of the relationship between the church and business is limited, anecdotal pastoral reflections can still be found. Michael Kruse publishes a regular blog post on the intersection of the church and business in which he writes, "We need to recover an image of the church along the lines of a family business."[148] His observation is not invented from his own imagination but grounded in biblical observations.

> Business and economic metaphors are scattered throughout the New Testament. Both Jesus and Paul cast themselves as servants within the household who are about the master's business. Christian discipleship is cast in terms of the *oikonomos*, the household servant, who acted completely in the master's stead during his absence. Jesus talks about there being a great harvest and the workers are few. He reminds others that he must be about his Father's business. Therefore, you could not think about New Testament family without thinking about business.[149]

---

[146] Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5.

[147] Acts 6.

[148] Michael Kruse, "*Church as a Family Business*," Kruse Kronicle (blog), http://www.krusekronicle.com/kruse_kronicle/2009/01/church-as-a-family-business.html.

[149] Kruse, *Church as a Family Business*, blog.

Kruse goes on to challenge the argument that churches are not like family businesses by

reorienting critics of the concept toward what a church is actually called to do.

> I would suggest that in addition to lifting up the family business
> metaphor, that the most effective challenge to congregations trapped in a
> business mindset is not the condemnation of business and marketing.
> Rather, embrace the business-marketing mindset but press them to define
> what business they are in.[150]

Kruse seems to be suggesting that the structural parallels of the church and family

business are strong and that the resistance that some people feel toward making such a

comparison can be alleviated when it is acknowledged that the primary difference

between the two is not their essential organizational structure, but their goals, priorities,

methods, and resources. Having established that a local church shares organizational

similarities with a family business, leaders can then search for areas of commonality

where common grace principles can be applied, within scriptural confines, from the

world of business to the world of the church.

Applying Business Principles to Pastoral Transition

This study seeks to discern what the church might learn from businesses about the

transition from an entrepreneurial founder to his or her first successor. Clear parallels

arise between stakeholders and a congregation, a board and a church's leadership team, a

founding entrepreneur and a founding pastor and a new CEO and a successor pastor.

---

[150] Kruse, *Church as a Family Business*, blog.

Table 3: Comparison of Business Roles to Church roles	
Business Context	**Church Context**
Shareholders	Remaining Congregants
Board Members	Remaining Session or Church Staff
Founder/CEO	Departing Founding Pastor
Successor CEO	First Successor Pastor

Transition is a highly complicated issue whether in a church or a business. In their book, *Family Business Succession: The Final Test of Greatness*, Aronoff, McClure, and Ward note that "less than a third of family businesses survive into the second generation, and only about 13 percent make it into the third."[151] This statistic is echoed by a series of studies cited by Noel Tichy in his book, *Succession.*

> Only 30 percent of family businesses in America will pass the reins to the next generation, although close to 70 percent would like to keep the business in the family. By the third generation, only 12 percent of family businesses in the U.S. are typically still viable. Only 3 percent survive to the fourth generation and beyond.[152]

Although failures in transition planning might seem to impact only small, family-run businesses, the statistics for successful transition, at any stage in a company's existence, are not significantly better even among larger and more established companies.

---

[151] Aronoff, McClure, and Ward, *Family Business Succession*, 1.

[152] Noel M. Tichy, *Succession: Mastering the Make-or-Break Process of Leadership Transition* (New York: Portfolio, 2014), 236.

Failures in transition in larger companies may not result in the company's demise but

certainly impact their standing in the marketplace. Saporito and Winum, in their book,

Inside CEO Succession, note:

> We have all witnessed companies--increasingly in the past 20 years--
> who have lost their competitive edge and stalled forward momentum due
> to a poorly planned CEO succession that put the wrong leader in the top
> position. The business world is peppered with examples of companies
> that became their own worst enemies because of an absence of deep
> strategic thinking at the board level, lack of consensus on the future of
> the company, and as a result, failure to select the right CEO to lead the
> business forward.[153]
> Ciampa and Dotlich confirm the observations of Saporito and Winum in

Transitions at the Top: "Even more damaging are the long-term effects on the company's

ability to operate effectively and to innovate well enough to meet ever changing customer

needs and competitive challenges."[154]

Looking beyond the impact on the company itself, experts note the devastating

impact on the life of the successor CEO, who is always caught in the middle of poorly

planned transitions.

When transition planning is badly done, successors CEO's fail at a high rate. A

study by Ciampa and Watkins conducted for their book, *Right from the Start*, notes that

"only about 25 percent of those *next-in-line* executives hired from outside succeed in the

CEO job, and only about 50 percent of those who have been promoted from within."[155]

---

[153] Thomas J. Saporito and Paul Winum, *Inside CEO Succession: The Essential Guide to Leadership Transition* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 120.

[154] Dan Ciampa and David L. Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top: What Organizations Must Do to Make Sure New Leaders Succeed* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2015), 4.

[155] Dan Ciampa and Michael Watkins, *Right From The Start: Taking Charge In A New Leadership Role*, (Boston, MA.: Harvard Business Review Press, 2005), 3.

Thus, on average, about two-thirds of successor CEO's are set up to fail, after which they are forced to start all over again in another new place within only a short time.

These statistics on CEO failure are confirmed by a study cited in *Transitions at the Top*. This study, linked from a 2012 article in *Fortune* Magazine, indicates that "40 percent of executives who are hired into a job from outside or are promoted from within, fail within the first 18 months."[156]

Today, it's not just the overall failure rate that's at issue, but the decreasing length of tenure for business leaders.

> A CEO's tenure, on a global average, is now 7.6 years, down from 9.5 years in 1995, and in the past two decades, 30 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs have lasted fewer than three years in office. Other studies indicate that since 2007, 40 percent of CEOs were dismissed or forced to resign within their first 18 months on the job.[157]

Whether the company is large or small, authors like Saporito and Winum insist that successful transitions will always depend on human beings, and human beings are influenced by complicated psychological and political factors in any decision they make.

> Psychological factors...can undermine open and honest discussion and collaboration. And board members' passivity in the presence of strong personalities, self-serving alliances, or cliques among old and new board members, can inhibit the sharing of visions and ideas, suppress critical discussion on business strategy, and cause the board to inadequately define the skills and capabilities required of the CEO.[158]

---

[156] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top,* 3-4.

[157] Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession*, 208.

[158] Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession,* 122.

Thus, the observations made by experts in business underline how important it is for church leaders to carefully consider the complicated psychological factors present in all types of organizations who are facing transition.

Experts in relational dynamics describe these psychological factors as *systems.* Herrington, Creech, and Taylor explain relational systems this way:

> Whenever you engage in a relationship that is long term, intense, and significant, you become emotionally connected to one another in a living system. Each person who is a part of this interaction begins to affect and be affected by the anxiety and behaviors of the others.[159]

The late Edwin Friedman, a renowned expert in the field of relational systems, commented on how systems impact the arena of family business. He indicated, "In family businesses, all the tensions, alliances, and unresolved feelings that characterize the family leap over into the business and complicate the decision-making process."[160]

Amy Edmundson, a professor in the *Harvard School of Business*, emphasizes complexity of the system in any organization. "Successful organizations need to be managed as complex, adaptive systems rather than as intricate, controlled machines."[161]

Among the most significant factors impacting transition dynamics in family business is the founder's internal psychology. One writer says that a founder's "lifelong hopes, dreams, ambitions, relationships, even personal struggles with mortality—all

---

[159] Herrington, Creech, and Taylor, *The Leader's Journey*, 29.

[160] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 218.

[161] Amy C. Edmondson, *Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy*, (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 570.

figure into managing succession."[162] Another adds, "When the CEO is also the founder, it means letting go of the business he or she spent a lifetime building--often an incredibly painful emotional experience."[163] Bridges and Bridges layer on another level of complication in describing the deep sense of fear and loss in the mind of a founder when the idea of transition is broached. "Changes cause transitions, which cause losses, and it is the losses, not the changes, that they're reacting to...It's a piece of their world that is being lost, not a piece of ours."[164]

In relation to the psychological factors in founding organizational entrepreneurs, some researchers have identified a condition called "Founders Syndrome" which is marked by the following tendencies:[165]

1. An unwillingness to face the emotional sense of loss that comes with leaving their leadership post.

2. A hope that, although the organization may be in decline, that they still have what it takes to turn it around.

3. Fear that all they've done will be lost under the leadership of the next person.

4. Fear of the unknown in relation to their own futures.

5. Waiting (and waiting and waiting) on the right potential successor.

---

[162] Aronoff, McClure, and Ward, *Family Business Succession,* 1.

[163] Aronoff, McClure, and Ward, *Family Business Succession,* 3.

[164] William Bridges and Susan Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, (Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2009), 26-27.

[165] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 80–82. This is my summary of their larger section.

6. Being too deeply enmeshed in enjoying the comfort level they've achieved.

When a founder is wrestling with these thoughts, many of them come to the conclusion that they should never retire or at least that there is no good reason for them to waste time thinking about retirement and transition any time soon. This thinking leads to the undeniable assertion that "Succession from first generation leaders to second generation leaders are the least likely to go well. In fact, too often they end up much more like a divorce than a wedding."[166]

The reality is that founding entrepreneurs are built differently than those who tend to follow them.

> Too many people don't understand the incredibly important difference between first generation leadership and second-generation leadership...First generation leaders are often Type A, make it happen people...By contrast, the second-generation leader comes into an existing organization, and the momentum has already happened...The second-generation leader isn't driven by the same motives as the founder...they are often more collaborative and interactive. They like to exchange ideas with their team.[167]
> According to Saporito and Winum, many organizational leaders are too consumed

with running the day-to-day affairs of a company to think about the issue of succession.

> CEOs, though, are generally ambivalent about engaging in succession planning. In the beginning stages of their tenure, the CEO's focus is appropriately on the business-at-hand, driving his or her strategic agenda, aligning with the board, and developing a working relationship with the senior team. CEOs are not thinking about the end of their tenure but rather the demands and challenges of the here and now.[168]

---

[166] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 79.

[167] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 83–84.

[168] Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession*, 199.

In a recent article by David Fletcher on the relationship between transition in family business and the church, he quotes one board insider who suggests that the position held by a business founder requires the directors to craft a careful plan for his transition out of leadership that may involve the founder continuing on in some role within the company.

> In large companies, after the CEO is replaced, that person almost always leaves the company. However, in entrepreneurial companies, the board often tries to find ways the founder can remain within the company in a different role, such as remaining on the board or taking a lower-ranking executive role. Because those founders are so central to their companies, losing them completely could be very disruptive for the company. The ideal situation is where the board and the founder can craft an appropriate non-CEO role, one that the founder willingly takes on. However, given how hard it is to convince many founders that they should step down, there is also a big cost to keeping a disgruntled founder active in the company.[169]

Even in situations in which a founder has a healthy perspective on transition, this healthy perspective may not hold true with other family members or board members intimately involved in the process. Relational systems among the key stakeholders, board members, and family members hold sway over the direction of the business during a season of transition.

Extended family members who have a stake in the future of the company affect the discussions as well, and Aronoff, et al, note these issues:

> Another pitfall is the potential for conflict between passive shareholders and those who are active in the business...Passive shareholders may begin to see the business as a birthright and may resent the pay and perks of family members who are working in the business. Also, active

---

[169] David Fletcher, "Exit of a Founding Pastor," *XPastor* (blog), December 5, 2012, https://www.xpastor.org/strategy/10-year-planning/exit-of-a-founding-pastor-jeff-jones-slated-to-replace-gene-getz/.

shareholders may resent the demands of passive owners for dividends and liquidity.[170]

Ciampa and Dotlich confirm these observations, saying, "It is our position that most transition failures take place because the major players are unprepared for the critical crossroads they encounter and in particular because they underestimate or ignore the complexity of the process."[171] They add that one area of the greatest neglect in the business context is the onboarding process. "Ensuring the early productivity of new senior executives, or more importantly, ways to avoid their failure, has largely been ignored."[172]

Whatever the issue, as Aronoff writes, "Planning and implementing succession is a delicate task that breeds conflict...It can be frustrating for everyone involved."[173] All these complex factors can make the process of succession planning so daunting that many founders avoid it altogether. Then, because there is no clear succession plan, companies, both large and small, make poor decisions and implement poor strategies in searching for, hiring, and onboarding new leaders. Saporito and Winum highlight the fundamental reasons for this breakdown.

> The problem is (with succession planning) when CEO succession is viewed as narrowly as replacing a CEO who isn't functioning well or is expected to retire, it winds up becoming an event-driven incident that only receives attention when there's a pressing, unavoidable need...The reasons for many of the short and unsuccessful tenures of new CEOs are

---

[170] Aronoff, McClure, and Ward, *Family Business Succession*, 86.

[171] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top,* 24.

[172] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top,* 113.

[173] Aronoff, McClure, and Ward, *Family Business Succession,* 81.

usually much more complicated than what we can gather in the business
press. What we can discern, though, is that irreconcilable differences
between boards and recent successors most often result from a lack of
deep strategic reflection and genuine consensus at the board level. More
often than not, this leads to selecting the wrong leader for the wrong
reasons.[174]

In the end, "Whether the result of being stuck in outdated traditions, fearful of risk

and failure, or merely absorbed in denial, CEO's and their boards--across a number of

industries--were slow to respond to the challenges they faced, and their companies'

profits and share prices began to decline."[175] And these observations apply not only to for-

profit businesses, but also to the sphere of non-profit organizations like churches.

> The notion that organizations, independent of their tax status, shouldn't
> be focused on the development and succession of their leadership,
> especially at the top, strikes me as patently absurd...there is no reason
> that institutions in the not-for-profit sector shouldn't be held accountable
> for the development of the next generation of leadership.[176]

---

[174] Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession*, 123.

[175] Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession*, 11.

[176] Tichy, *Succession*, 270.

In summary, several conclusions arise from these readings. First, all organizations must plan for transition well in advance of the transition event itself. Experts like Aronoff and McClure suggest that the process of succession planning begin early in the tenure of a CEO. They write, "CEO's who enjoy the most success in passing on the business tend to begin exploring post-retirement endeavors as early as their late forties or early fifties."[177] And in cases where the CEO is still relatively young, they suggest, "It's a good idea to allow yourself as much as fifteen years to plan and execute a smooth transition."[178]

But the job of succession planning shouldn't just fall to the CEO; it must be a top concern of boards as well. Directors must become "students of transition" themselves.[179] This concept is confirmed by Leo Mullin, a successful lead director in a number of large companies. "For us, succession planning is a never-ending process that continuously develops talent two to three levels deep within our company."[180] Tichy elaborates on the responsibilities of directors by posing a core-driving question for board consideration: "How do we, the current generation of leaders, mentor, teach, coach, and provide our potential successors with the right crucible experiences that will truly prepare them to make good business decision in all three key judgment areas: people, strategy, and crisis?"[181]

---

[177] Aronoff, McClure, and Ward, *Family Business Succession*. 24.

[178] Aronoff, McClure, and Ward, *Family Business Succession*. 16.

[179] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top*, 123.

[180] Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession*, 78.

[181] Tichy, *Succession*, 241.

How this succession planning looks might vary from company to company but, as Saporito and Winum state, "Best practices today suggest that boards establish a committee explicitly chartered with the responsibility for driving the CEO succession planning process and for frequently updating all directors on its progress."[182] This step, in fact, has become a virtual mandate from the Securities and Exchange Commission. "In 2009 the SEC made it abundantly clear that there would be consequences if boards of directors failed to include CEO succession plans in their risk portfolios and proposals to shareholders."[183] In light of this, Saporito and Winum suggest, "It's crucial for boards to adopt two distinct time perspectives: one dedicated to the long-term development of talent and the other attentive to the sequencing of critical process and events leading up to and immediately following the succession date."[184]

Secondly, the most successful transitions occur in organizations that viewed the transition not just in terms of the senior leader but in terms of the whole organism. Ciampa and Dotlich suggest the following template of questions that the entire organization and its leadership team consider before embarking on transition planning: [185]

1. A strategic question: How can the new leader best graft a new strategy onto the one the organization is currently pursuing in a way that the organization does not reject it?

---

[182] Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession*, 126.

[183] Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession,* 84.

[184] Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession,* 90.

[185] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top*, 76–78.

2. An operational question: How can (the organization) maintain operational momentum for short-term results while implementing process and systems necessary both for the new leader to achieve his objectives and also for a new strategy?

3. A political question: How can (the organization) help new leaders understand our company's political structure while also ensuring they adapt it to meet the strategic and operational objectives they were hired to implement?

4. A personal question: How can the new leader best take control and establish himself assertively and with confidence while also pausing to understand the needs and motivations of the people he has inherited?

5. A cultural question: How can (the organization) help the new leader understand the company's cultural norms so that she can make the culture work for her to achieve what she was hired to do?

Of these factors, the one that authors like Ciampa and Dotlich feel is the most important and most difficult is the cultural factor. They write, "Cultural factors are a major ingredient in the new leader's success...The major players must be prepared to explain the culture clearly and in a practical way to the new leader...the power and influence aspect of the culture is the most important for the new leader to understand." They later add, "Before joining and settling in, it is difficult to grasp these layers of behavior, politics, expectations, rituals, traditions, and beliefs.[186] They are rarely

---

[186] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top*, 106.

explained to the new leader by the major players because they themselves do not recognize them well enough to articulate a description."[187]

Vanderbloemen and Bird agree with this assessment. "Culture--not vision or strategy--is the most powerful factor in any organization."[188] Bridges and Bridges come to a similar conclusion but swap the term *culture* for *immune system*, noting, "Every organizational system has its own natural 'immune system' whose task it is to resist unfamiliar, and so unrecognizable, signals."[189]

Whatever term one might use to describe the culture of a business, the impact of that culture on the ability of that organization to transition is of central importance. When cultural factors are ignored or under-appreciated, they usually result in "a mismatch between their (the new leader's) style and the culture of their (new) companies."[190]

Finally, successful transitions depend on structuring entire organizations to withstand the undeniable forces that seek to derail the process of transition. Organizations can't just plan for transition in the narrow sense of seeking out a new CEO; they must structure the organization to succeed well in advance of transition.[191] At the deepest level, organizations that wish to transition well, especially those that look more like family businesses, must develop an organizational system grounded in trust.[192]

---

[187] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top*, 42.

[188] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 76.

[189] Bridges and Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, 50.

[190] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top*, 101.

[191] This is the narrow focus of my concern and what I will be exploring in my case studies.

[192] "When the members of one four-sibling partnership were asked why the business relationship had worked so well, they had a short answer: 'Our parents taught us to trust each other.' Aronoff, McClure, and Ward, *Family Business Succession*, 82.

Initial Transition in the Context of a Local Church

What is true in the world of business transition is anecdotally demonstrated in church transitions in that the statistics on the failure of family business transition from the founder to the immediate successor mirror those of church plants that experience pain, loss, and even closure as they move from founding pastor to immediate successor pastor.[193] The next area of literature reviewed looked to experts in the field of transition, with a special focus on how their principles apply to the local church to better understand the main issues churches face during a season of transition.

Before considering the issues facing churches in seasons of transition, it may be helpful to define transition. "Transition," according to Dale Travis, CEO of the Leadership Network, is "the intentional process of the transfer of leadership, power, and authority from one directional leader to another."[194] Aronoff prefers the term succession, indicating, "Narrowly speaking, succession means the transition of family business leadership and ownership from one generation to the next. Broadly speaking, however, succession is a lifelong process of planning and management.[195]

---

[193] This researcher contacted approximately 30 churches as possible participants in this study and less than a handful reported a successful transition in which there was little pain or loss.

[194] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 10.

[195] Aronoff, McClure, and Ward, *Family Business Succession*, 6.

Issues Facing Churches in Seasons of Transition

Several critical questions need to be considered by any congregation concerned

about avoiding the pitfalls common in most transitions.

When Will Transition Happen?

As Vanderbloemen states, succession occurs inevitably and repeatedly, whether

it's a first pastorate or a tenth pastorate."[196] For this reason, the leadership of every

congregation needs to have a mindset that "Every pastor is an interim pastor."[197]

Is There a Pre-existing Congregational Plan for Transition?

Amazingly, this truism fails to penetrate the leadership of many organizations,

which surely must include churches. Ciampa notes, "In a survey by executive search firm

Heidrick & Struggles and the Rock Center for Corporate Governance at Stanford

University, half the companies provided no formal transition plan for the new leader."[198]

If this is the case in the corporate world, it makes one wonder what the percentage would

be for churches. Saporito asserts that the work of succession planning is fundamental to

the work of any board. "Defining the strategic direction of the company and the

leadership skills required to advance the organization into that future are arguably the

most fundamental responsibilities of a board."[199] Vanderbloemen, focusing this issue on

---

[196] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 10.

[197] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 9.

[198] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top*, 85.

[199] Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession*, 121.

the organization of the church, states, "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."[200]

Among the most challenging aspects of developing such a plan is the consideration of where the next leader will come from. Leo Mullin, former CEO of a number of large companies, reflects on how the organizations he led thought about this issue. "For us, succession planning is a never-ending process that continuously develops talent two to three levels deep within our company." He adds, "Our ongoing preference as a board is to find an internal successor to the CEO in order to maintain our strategic heading and preserve our culture."[201] Conversely, Vanderblomen's research in the world of the church indicates, "One trend we've noticed is that the right person to succeed is often the one who has been prepared elsewhere."[202]

Whether the person is promoted from within or hired from outside, the statistics on successful transition are grim. According to Ciampa, "Only about 25 percent of those next-in-line executives hired from the outside succeed in the CEO job, and only about 50 percent of those who have been promoted from within."[203]

---

[200] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 9.

[201] Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession*, 78.

[202] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 24.

[203] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top*, 5.

How Do Denominational Structures Impact Transition?

While succession plans in most companies are governed by independent boards of directors that give a significant degree of latitude to the board or existing CEO, the context for congregational transition is often influenced by external structures placed on individual congregations by their denominations or constitutional documents. Vanderbloemen states, "In many denominations, the current processes, policies, and polities discourage and even preclude any proactive planning or preparation by pastors and congregations for changes in pastoral leadership."[204]

For instance, the Presbyterian Church in America requires pastoral candidates, among a number of other pre-qualifications, to be sought out and recommended by a specially appointed search committee elected by a local congregation.[205] This is not the case in denominations like the United Methodist Church, which leaves the appointment of new ministers to the presiding bishop and/or district superintendent.[206] The Southern Baptist Convention, which operates on a congregationalist model of polity, leaves the pastoral search process wholly in the hands of the congregation, though often guided by a church constitution.[207]

---

[204] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 29.

[205] Presbyterian Church in America, *The Book of Church Order*, 2018 ed. (Lawrenceville, GA: Committee on Discipleship Ministries, 2018), 20-2.

[206] "¶ 425 ff. Appointment-Making," *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church,* UMC.org, 2016, https://www.umc.org/en/content/book-of-discipline-425-appointment-making.

[207] "The SBC does not assign pastors; nor does it recommend pastors to churches. Since ordination is a function of the local church, each church decides for itself how it interprets the gifts and calling of God in an individual and whether it will consider employment of someone who was ordained in a non-Baptist faith community." "Frequently Asked Questions," Southern Baptist Convention, http://www.sbc.net/faqs.asp.

Oftentimes the guidelines provided by denominational systems are helpful to the process of transition and are designed to prevent a leadership coup. However, in cases in which a planned succession is in view, these guidelines make the process of promoting an internal candidate difficult. For instance, even if a PCA congregation desires to promote an internal candidate, the PCA *Book of Church Order* sets a high bar for any candidate to ascend from an assistant or associate pastor position to the position of senior pastor in that same congregation. The rule in place in the PCA is stated as follows:

> The associate or assistant pastors may continue to serve a congregation when the pastoral relation of the senior pastor is dissolved, but they may not normally succeed the senior pastor without an intervening term of service in a different field of labor. However, a congregation by a secret ballot with four-fifths (4/5) majority vote may petition Presbytery for an exception which by a three-fourths (3/4) majority vote Presbytery may grant. Presbytery needs to determine if the dissolution of the pastoral relationship with the senior pastor was brought about in Christian love and good order on the part of the parties concerned.[208]

While churches must honor the rules and restrictions placed upon them by their denominational standards, the common grace wisdom of the corporate world may provide some helpful guidance within these boundaries. For instance, Saporito and Winum say, "Best practices today suggests that the boards establish a committee explicitly chartered with the responsibility for driving the CEO succession planning process and for frequently updating all directors on its progress."[209] They go on to highlight ten critical

---

[208] Presbyterian Church in America, *The Book of Church Order*, 23-1.

[209] Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession*, 76.

questions that leadership groups must work through as they wrestle with the issue of transition, seven of which are of particular note for the pre-transition period.[210]

1. Is our board taking primary responsibility for CEO succession planning?

2. Does our board have an adequate succession planning time frame that allows for candidate development and leadership transition?

3. What is the emergency CEO succession plan?

4. Is our board aligned on the company's vision and strategic direction, and does that strategic plan define the talents and skills required of the CEO?

5. Does our company have a rigorous talent development program?

6. What is our company's external talent assessment process?

7. How genuinely open and attentive is the board in managing the relational dynamics and personal emotions associated with the CEO succession process?

How Does the Pre-existing Congregational Culture Impact Transition?

Of particular note for churches in the list by Saporito and Winum is the issue of organizational culture. Sam Chand, a noted church leadership consultant, believes that "culture--not vision or strategy--is the most powerful factor in any organization."[211] Breakdowns in this very area, as Ciampa notes, are the "primary reason for leaders leaving companies prematurely because of a mismatch between their styles and the

---

[210] Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession,* 213-217.

[211] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 76.

cultures of their companies."[212] The reasons for this, especially related to outsiders who

join an organization, are complicated, but Ciampa and Dotlich indicate:

> The political facet of an organization's life is made up of the alliances
> and coalitions that determine how key decisions are made, whose
> opinion has the most weight, who influences whom, and why. It
> determines whose ideas and decisions are supported as much as or often
> more than any other factor.[213]

They add, "Before joining and settling in, it is difficult to grasp these layers of behavior,

politics, expectations, rituals, traditions, and beliefs. They are rarely explained to the new

leader by the major players because they themselves do not recognize them well enough

to articulate a description."[214]

According to Saporito, the major political players of an organization can come

from a broad group of individuals.

> Internal stakeholders including employees, boards of directors,
> customers, suppliers, and increasingly more external constituents
> including government agencies, environmentalists, consumer groups,
> and other organizations have escalated their expectations for personal
> involvement. These stakeholders have moved from merely wanting to be
> informed to expecting to participate in and affect the decisions of the
> company.[215]

One founding pastor brings this complex set of issues down to the most basic

level. "Your congregation is, in an intimate way, your family." This same pastor adds that

---

[212] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top*, 101.

[213] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top*, 39.

[214] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top*, 42.

[215] Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession*, 16.

as a leader, "Regardless of the size of a church, whether you know all your people or not, they all know you, and you are an important part of their lives."[216]

Another successor pastor describes how he tried to get a handle on the culture of the church he was inheriting by working to begin the process of developing trust between he and the longtime members of the church:

> Before I preached my first sermon at St. Luke's, I spent a lot of time reading about the founding and the life and the history of St. Luke's by visiting with key lay and clergy leaders. I had some long conversation with Dr. Carver McGriff about the history of St. Luke's and about some of the highlights of his twenty-six years of highly effective ministry there. I interviewed some of the founding members and asked them to share with me some of their most cherished memories from the past.[217]

How Does the Existing Pastor Impact the Process of Transition?

Of all those individuals impacting transition, the incumbent leader has the greatest ability to contribute to the success or failure of the impending transition. Unfortunately, as Saporito noted earlier,[218] CEO's and entrepreneurial leaders are often not interested in considering long term organizational transition.

Thankfully, this isn't always the case. One incumbent pastor, reflecting on his own transition out of the leadership of a church, said, "I began to realize that my measure of success in ministry was going to be based on whether the congregation was continuing to grow and thrive five years after I was out of the pilot's seat."[219]

[216] Robert Schnase, *Transitions: Leading Churches through Change*, ed. David N. Mosser (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 6.

[217] Schnase, *Transitions,* 9.

[218] Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession*, 199.

[219] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 42.

Key to pastors leaving the pilot's seat is their sense that they still have value once they depart. Dr. William Willimon, who teaches practical theology at Duke Divinity School notes, "Often pastors' identities are so tied to their jobs that they forget they can still serve the church after stepping down. There's an ending to the pastoral life. The ending is you get to be a disciple again."[220]

When an organization has had multiple prior leaders, it may be easier to reach this mature conclusion. M. Kent Millard, both a succeeding and preceding pastor, comments, "Humility, not arrogance, is the chief underlying spiritual characteristic of great leaders, and during times of transition great leaders will be humbly aware of the debt they owe to the leaders who served before them."[221]

Millard's predecessor, E. Carver McGriff, in the same article quoted above, reflects on the responsibility he had regarding the man who would succeed him. "As I prepared to leave, and as someone whom I did not know prepared to take my place, I knew I simply must demand of myself that what I said and did in the weeks before I left be in every way commensurate with the gospel I preached for so many years."[222]

Is this a First-time Transition?

Before moving to the factors that contribute directly to successful and unsuccessful transitions, it's important to consider the under-examined issue of the transitional factors related to founding pastors and first successors.

---

[220] Ruth Moon, "Quitting Time: The Pope Retired. Should Your Pastor?," *Christianity Today*, March 12, 2013, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/april/quitting-time.html.

[221] Schnase, *Transitions*, 11.

[222] Schnase, *Transitions*, 6.

Interestingly, the issue of transition from a founder to first successor is regularly addressed in the realm of family businesses, because aside from the decision to found the company in the first place, the transition from the founder to the first successor is the most important decision the company will ever face. The reason for this is that "Less than one third of family businesses survive into the second generation, and only about 13 percent make it into the third."[223]

One of the few church experts to comment on this circumstance notes, "Succession from first generation leaders to second generation leaders are the least likely to go well. In fact, too often they end up much more like a divorce than a wedding."[224] They explain the reasons for this.

> Too many people don't understand the incredibly important difference between first- generation leadership and second-generation leadership...First-generation leaders are often Type A, make it happen people...By contrast, the second-generation leader comes into an existing organization and the momentum has already happened...The second-generation leader isn't driven by the same motives as the founder...they are often more collaborative and interactive. They like to exchange ideas with their team.[225]

Additionally, as previously explained by Aronoff, "When the CEO is also the founder, it means letting go of the business he or she spent a lifetime building--often an incredibly painful emotional experience."[226]

---

[223] Aronoff, McClure, and Ward, *Family Business Succession,* 1.

[224] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next,* 79.

[225] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 83–84.

[226] Aronoff, McClure, and Ward, *Family Business Succession*, 3.

As noted earlier, the pain suffered by founders led Vanderbloemen et al, to invent a name for the psychological situation that can crop up in the life of a founder. They call it "Founder's Syndrome," the general components of which involve: Unwillingness to face the emotional sense of loss that comes when someone else takes their place; when the church is in decline the certain feeling that since they once grew the church they have what it takes to turn it around again; a deep fear that if they leave all they've done will be lost under the next person; more comfort with sticking around in an eroding situation than having to face the fear of the unknown if they depart; waiting on the exact right potential successor to show up; fear of losing the perks that come with the long and important tenure they've had in their congregation.[227] "As a result," these authors conclude, "Some believe that they should never retire!"[228]

One successor pastor reflected on her unique transition experience following the tenure of a long-term founding pastor, writing:

> As time went by, it became apparent that the most daunting issues of the transition had much less to do with my being a woman than with my not being my predecessor. Forty-two years is a long time, and people had become accustomed to having things done a certain way. Whatever I suggested felt revolutionary to some, even if it was nothing more major than moving the church mailbox.[229]

This dynamic is reminiscent of the complications faced by new stepparents as they seek to navigate the dual complexity of building a relationship with their new spouse and developing credibility with their new stepchildren.

---

[227] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 80–82.

[228] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 82.

[229] Schnase, *Transitions*, 16.

The normal progression in a first marriage is for the couple's relationship to broaden from one characterized by romance before children to one of partnership after children. Without a honeymoon period, stepfamily couples are forced to negotiate their partnership at the same time they are solidifying their romance.[230]

Summary of Readings

Experts in a number of fields have much wisdom to offer churches as they navigate the transition from their founding pastor to the first successor pastor.

First, the core ministry categories in which pastors are called to labor become categories because they are the primary measures by which a successor pastor will be judged by church members.

Second, two important biblical stories of transition, one successful (Moses to Joshua) and one unsuccessful (Samuel to Saul), provided insights related to the reasons for their respective success and failure.

Third, experts on stepfamilies related the challenges that crop up when transition occurs in a family context, and clear comparisons existed between the roles in a stepfamily (stepchild, former biological parent, existing biological parent and new stepparent) and the roles in a church (congregation, preceding pastor, remaining leadership and successor pastor).

Fourth, experts in the area of business showed how leadership transition has clear comparisons between the key players in a business transition (board, shareholders, former

---

[230] Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 104.

CEO, new CEO) and the roles in a church (existing leadership, congregation, preceding pastor, successor pastor).

Finally, experts in all the surveyed fields provided conclusions about what organizations like churches should be thinking about as they approach the daunting task of initial transition, making special note of several key questions that should be considered in the process.

In all of these areas we also observed that only limited attention has been paid to the highly unique circumstance of transition from a founding pastor to a first successor. It will be this unique circumstance that will occupy our attention in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

Statement of the Problem

Good research on the question of pastoral transitions, particularly from the pastor's perspective, have aided many church transitions, but detailed research on the narrower question of transition from a founding pastorate to a successor pastorate is lacking, especially for the congregation and its remaining organic leadership.[231] Thus, this study will ask what churches can learn from the experience of other first-generation churches that have passed through the season of first transition.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore how church leaders describe influential factors in transitioning from the founding pastor (FP) to the first successor pastor (SP).

---

[231] The researcher conducted a number of online searches of the phrase "transition from a founding pastor" on or near October 1, 2016 and received no direct hits on books or statistical studies on this specific topic and only a small number of hits for online or magazine articles from the following search engines: 1) Mobius 2) Amazon.com 3) Google.com 4) Yahoo.com.

Research Questions

To discern these best ministry practices, the study needed to determine what criteria would best enable the broadest range of exposure to interview questions while keeping the study narrow enough not to go beyond its parameters.

To examine these areas more closely, the following research questions served as the intended focus of the qualitative research:

1. What factors were most influential in the ways that the church's leadership prepared itself for the transition from the FP (founding pastor) to the first SP (successor pastor)?

2. What factors were most influential in the actual process of transitioning from the FP to the first SP?

3. Which ministry leadership differences between the FP and the SP were most influential in reference to onboarding the SP into the congregation?

4. Which overall factors were most influential in the eventual outcome of the transition from the FP to the first SP?

Design of the Study

Sharan B. Merriam, in her book, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, defines a general qualitative study as research most interested in "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what

meaning they attribute to their experiences."[232] Merriam identifies four characteristics of qualitative research, "focus on meaning and understanding, researcher as primary instrument, an inductive process, and a rich description."[233] A qualitative approach, as opposed to a quantitative, statistical approach, enabled the researcher to explore the intertwined, relational nuances in church leadership transitions.

In order to limit the breadth of inquiry, this study employed a modified case study approach. According to Merriam, a case study is "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system," which she elaborates on further as "a single entity unit around which there are boundaries," meaning that the researcher decides the parameters for what precisely they desire to study and not study.[234]

The boundary applied was churches in the Presbyterian Church in America.

Participant Sample Selection

The research required the collection of detailed data from participants who were able to communicate in depth about their experiences during an initial pastoral transition. Therefore, a "purposeful sample selection" process was used. Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to "discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned."[235]

---

[232] Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 14.

[233] Merriam, *Qualitative Research,* 14-16.

[234] Merriam, *Qualitative Research,* 40.

[235] Merriam, *Qualitative Research,* 77.

For the most in-depth data in best practices, the researcher chose the following criteria for the churches from which participants could be selected.

a) The churches needed to be at least ten years old.[236]

b) The founding/planting pastor had to have been in the role for at least seven years.[237]

c) The first successor pastor had to have been in place for at least three years.[238]

d) The church had to be a church in the PCA.[239]

e) The church had to have a current membership of under 500 people.[240]

Moving beyond the qualifying criteria for churches, the researcher focused on the following types of people for research interviews.

a) Founding pastors

b) Church elders who had been present with both pastors[241]

---

[236] This figure could include a season when the church was not yet a "particular" or "independent" congregation.

[237] The researcher arrived at this figure based on the work of Larry Gilpin who, in his somewhat related dissertation suggests that the average length of a pastorate in the PCA is seven years (Gilpin, 72).

[238] The reason for settling on a minimum of three years for the succeeding pastor was based on anecdotal evidence that suggests that if a pastor lasts at least three years in a pulpit there is a very good likelihood that he has survived the honeymoon period and begun to gain credibility in the congregation.

[239] The researcher determined to limit his research to his own denomination because this is where his contacts were best, where he best understood the system of polity, and finally, where the results of his research could be best applied.

[240] As to size, since most congregations in the PCA are relatively small the researcher thought the research from this study should be particularly aimed at the denominational average sized church.

[241] The critical criteria here is that the individual be interviewed would need to have experienced the leadership terms of both of the pastors and who, therefore would have the most perspective on strengths, weaknesses, and other matters.

c) First successor pastors[242]

The researcher then opted for what Merriam calls a "typical sample" to gain a range of insights from initial pastoral transitions and to assess variations in perspective on the same event.[243]

Potential participants were approached via personal contact with founding pastors or successor pastors and by sending out a broad appeal to churches via the PCA Ruling and Teaching Elders Facebook Group, seeking demographic information to determine whether or not churches qualified for the researcher's criteria. The researcher had conversations with over thirty churches to determine if they fit the research criteria established for the study.

Eventually, three churches were selected, and the final study participants were formally invited to participate via an introductory letter or email, followed by a personal phone call. All who expressed interest were asked to give their written consent to participate.

Once the subject churches and individual participants were identified, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data

---

[242] The researcher wrestled mightily with whether or not to include the voice of the successor pastor in interviews but in the end felt like having this voice would be more beneficial for the intended audience (church planting pastors especially) to hear from the more technical ministry perspective of another teaching elder who entered the church after the departure of the first pastor and who would bring more nuance on some ministry matters that would need to be touched upon.

[243] Merriam, *Qualitative Research*. 78. Merriam says, "a typical sample would be one that is selected because it reflects the average person, situation or instance of the phenomenon of interest."

collection.[244] This qualitative method provided for the discovery of the most comprehensive and descriptive data.

The final part of the study compared the transition processes of the three participating churches and employed the modified case study model to conduct interviews with the participants.

Data Collection

After the interview group had been finalized, the successor pastor and church elder for each of the three case studies were asked to complete a one-page demographic questionnaire before the interview. The questionnaire asked for the basic demographics and history of the church and provided the researcher with a contextual overview.

In addition, each participant signed a "Research Participant Consent Form" to respect and to protect the human rights of the participants and to ensure that all reporting of their names, detailed ministry contexts, and locations would be kept confidential.

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. A semi-structured interview utilizes questions that are "more flexibly worded" and normally makes use of "a mix of more or and less structured questions."[245] This more open-ended interview style facilitates the researcher's ability to build upon participant responses to explore complexity and nuance more thoroughly. Ultimately, this method enabled this

---

[244] Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 89-91.

[245] Merriam, *Qualitative Research,* 90.

study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants interviewed.

A pilot test of the interview protocol was performed to evaluate the questions for clarity and usefulness in eliciting relevant data. Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature but evolved around the explanations and descriptions that emerged from constant comparison work during the interview process. Meriam defines the "constant comparative" method of data analysis as one that "involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences."[246]

Study participants were interviewed individually and in-person for 60-90 minutes. Prior to the interview, the participants received an email informing them of the date, time, and location of the interview. The researcher audio-taped the interviews with a digital recorder and during each interview kept field notes with descriptive and reflective observations which were typed into a word processor for later reference.

All interviews were conducted within a period of six months, enabling the researcher the opportunity to become fully immersed in the process and data in an undistracted manner.

The interview protocol contained the following research questions, along with some of the informally worded questions used to elicit additional feedback.

---

[246] Merriam, *Qualitative Research,* 30.

1. In what ways did the church's leadership prepare itself for the transition from the founding pastor to the first successor pastor?

- What was involved in the planning process?

- How was the founding pastor involved in the planning process?

- How was the session involved in the planning process?

- How was the congregation involved in the planning process?

- How was outside counsel involved in the planning process?

2. What factors in the actual process of transitioning from the founding pastor to the first successor pastor were most influential?

- Which BCO approach was employed in conducting the search for the SP?

- How was the determination made whether internal candidates would be considered?

- What work was done among the pulpit search team to prepare them for their task?

- How was the departing FP involved in the equipping of the pulpit committee?

- How was the congregation equipped for transition from FP to SP?

- What was the role of the departing FP after the transition was complete?

3. How did ministry leadership differences between the founding pastor and the first successor pastor impact the church in the process of transitioning from one to the other?

What were some of the differences between the FP and SP in their handling of...

- The pulpit ministry of the church?

- The style of pastoral care within the congregation?

- The process for equipping the congregation for the work of ministry?

- The approach of developing a strategic vision for ministry?

4. Which overall factors were most influential in the eventual outcome of the transition from the founding pastor to the first successor pastor?

- Which strategies employed were most beneficial to the process?

- Which strategies employed were most harmful to the process?

As the interviews unfolded, the researcher developed more pointed probes and follow ups that assisted in developing a better understanding of the key points.

After each interview, it was transcribed by either the researcher or a paid research assistant while interviews of other participants continued in the various case studies. This process allowed for the emergence of new sources of data as the project unfolded.

Data Analysis

As soon as possible following the conclusion of the interviews, the researcher collected all the completed transcripts, read through each to ensure accuracy with the digital recordings, made slight grammatical corrections to the transcripts to smooth out speech patterns, and grew well acquainted with the content.

Following this, the researcher used the Zotero research platform to sort the data into themes, key words, concepts, and other conceptual categories. In particular the researcher adopted the recommendations of Merriam that qualitative data be analyzed via

a continuing process of "induction" and "comparison."[247] According to Merriam, the

primary concern in data analysis is the researcher's pursuit of:

a) categories that are responsive to the purpose of the research.

b) categories that are exhaustive.

c) categories that are mutually exclusive.

d) categories that are sensitizing; and,

e) categories that are conceptually congruent.[248]

Once these categories were sorted, the remaining data analysis focused on

discovering and identifying (1) common themes, patterns, and personal experiences; (2)

congruence or discrepancy between the different groups of participants, and (3) unusual

observations made by participants. In addition, to compare the data to existing research,

these observations were run through a ministry practices grid created by the researcher

based on observations of others who have studied pastoral transition (See Table 1).

Researcher Position

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the one responsible for both defining and

collecting the data to be analyzed. Because the researcher plays such a significant role in

the process, it is important to note key biographical and philosophical commitments held

by the researcher.

---

[247] Merriam, *Qualitative Research,* 175.

[248] Merriam, *Qualitative Research,* 185-186.

First and foremost, the researcher is a committed, evangelical Christian who believes the Bible to be the inspired, inerrant, and authoritative word of God. In this regard, he relies heavily on the Bible to inform his understanding of what a church is, what a pastor is, and what core moral and ethical commitments are incumbent upon each in the conduct of ministry.

Additionally, the researcher is the child of divorce and has lived some of the realities noted in his secondary area of research related to stepfamilies.

Finally, the researcher is a PCA pastor who has served in full-time pastoral ministry for over twenty-five years. In his pastoral calling, he has served as an assistant pastor of a large congregation that experienced a painful breakdown after the unexpected death of the founding pastor, a first successor pastor in a smaller congregation that struggled to make the transition away from the their founder, and now, as a founding pastor in a rapidly growing, medium-sized congregation within fifteen years of making its own first transition.

These experiences suggest some biases affecting the position of the researcher, but the researcher believes that these experiences have actually made him more sensitive to and aware of the issues being addressed.

Study Limitations

As stated previously, those interviewed had direct knowledge of critical factors in initial pastoral transitions in three church settings. Since these findings are qualitative and not quantitative, some of the conclusions reached may or may not be borne out in a much broader statistical survey of churches in similar circumstances.

Additionally, the recommendations made at the conclusion of the study may not apply in any uniform sense to the church broadly or even to the denomination in which the researcher serves. However, some of the study's findings, and in particular, the principles listed in chapter five may be useful to medium-sized PCA churches in North America interested in better understanding a first pastoral transition.

Readers who desire to generalize some of the particular aspects of these conclusions on the basis of the following research should take careful note of the wide range of factors in pastoral transitions, many of which could not be directly surveyed for this study, but which are reviewed in some detail in chapter five.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study is to explore how church leaders describe influential factors in their process of transitioning from the founding pastor (FP) to the first successor pastor (SP).

The general qualitative research approach using a semi-structured interview design in the context of a typical sample was critical to facilitating the research necessary for those who access it in the future. While there were certain limitations and biases present, the data gathered was critical to arriving at thoughtful and useful conclusions for founding pastors and church leaders in the years ahead.

Chapter 4

Interview Material

The purpose of this study is to explore how church leaders describe influential factors in the process of transitioning from the founding pastor (FP) to the first successor pastor (SP).

The researcher gathered data from three churches by interviewing founding pastors (FP), first successor pastors (SP) and ruling elders (RE) who witnessed the work of the founding pastor and successor pastor and who aided the transition process from within.

These churches had three different transition experiences. In the first case (Fellowship Presbyterian), the founding pastor burned out and vacated his ministry without a transition plan. In the second case (St. John's Presbyterian), the founding pastor encountered difficulty with the leadership and left to take another ministry calling without a transition plan in place. In the third case (Reconciliation Presbyterian), the ministry transition was pre-planned, and the founding pastor remained on the church staff in a different role.

Study Participant Profiles

Fellowship Presbyterian Church (FPC) of Dallas

FPC was a church plant and bore a heavy ministry imprimatur from its mother church, which had a hand selected its founding pastor, Gary Matthews, who was then

given the charge of starting the church from scratch using guidelines passed along from the mother church.

After a few months, Matthews had formed a core group to implement the organizational model passed on by the mother church. Sam Jackson, a ruling elder who was a part of the project from the beginning, said, "FPC had the DNA of the whole mother church planting model, and Gary was very much of that school as well." Over the next thirteen years, the church grew from the core group to a congregation of almost 200.

However, unbeknownst to the leadership, the founding pastor was going through a painful burnout. As Sam put it, "Looking back now, knowing something about Maslach's burnout inventory, our pastor had been dealing with it for a while and covering it up . . .. Let me make that real clear: it wasn't a scandalous fall; it was that he had nothing left to give." [249]

Once the session became aware of the problem, things degenerated quickly, and Gary withdrew from all of his ministry responsibilities. The session proceeded to put him on a leave of absence, which turned into a sabbatical, which ultimately resulted in his resignation. According to Jackson, Gary never preached another sermon at the church. As Sam reflected on the situation, he realized that Gary wanted out. "In some ways, given where he was at the time, he just wanted somebody else to pull the proverbial pin."

Though the process of burnout had been going on for some time, when it finally erupted, it came as a complete surprise to the leadership. They were now left without any semblance of a plan for what to do next, let alone deal with the transition from the

---

[249] https://www.mindgarden.com/117-maslach-burnout-inventory, accessed on April 24, 2020.

founding pastor to the first successor pastor. "The meta-question of moving from the founder to the second pastor really wasn't a question we wrestled with, it was just more of the mechanics of 'how do we find the next guy?'"

The pastor who would later succeed him, Barry Carter, remarked, "Gary was tired, and I think the congregation was tired of him. They both knew it was a bad marriage."

At first, the task for developing a plan to replace the founding pastor fell completely to Jackson, who wanted to ask for help from the departing founding pastor but knew he couldn't offer any assistance because of his emotional state. As a result, Sam pressed forward on his own and quickly oversaw the formation of a pulpit search committee. He worked on this search committee as well.

However, learning how to approach the transition was proving difficult. Sam and the other elders struggled to see how a new pastor could blend in with their highly structured organizational culture and how they could be certain that he would be a good fit. In the absence of any internal guidance, Sam did some research, got help from the administrative committee of the denomination, and talked to people he knew. He added, "Looking back now, partly because we we're moving from the founder to another pastor, we just felt kind of a little bit adrift and lost at that point." Unfortunately, the emotional pressure of losing the founding pastor and figuring out the transition while juggling needs in his own family took a toll on Sam as he too experienced his own breakdown. "I served on the pulpit search team up until I hit a point myself where I couldn't continue."

Eventually a solid candidate for the position emerged in the person of Barry Carter, but Barry himself had become aware of the difficult circumstances involved in the

late days of Gary's tenure and felt like it was critical to ask a lot of questions about the circumstances surrounding his departure, the culture of the church, and the degree of woundedness in the congregation. He added, "We talked a lot about what the desire of the church was going forward, and we had a lot of conversations about cultural fit."

What ended up tipping the balance toward Barry accepting the call was a critical insight related to the end of the founding pastor's term. "When he left, he showed a lot of humility. He did not leave scorched earth. He didn't do underhanded things that a lot of pastors do when they leave. He just did it well. He left with kindness and humility. He didn't blow anything up or set fire to things."

Sam affirmed this as he recounted the severing of Gary's pastoral call at presbytery. "When we formally severed the pastoral relationship with Gary at presbytery, I had a number of guys tell me that it was the most beautiful and caring severing of a pastoral relationship they'd ever seen. I mean, we got there and wept together. We love him still, you know, we loved him then, and we love him now." Sam knew that even though it was the right decision for Gary to move out of ministry, Gary carried a tremendous burden of guilt for having let down the church he founded.

St. John's Presbyterian Church (SPJC) of Louisville

SJPC came into being as the daughter church of a traditional and well-established church in a different part of Louisville. However, according to the founding pastor, David Evans, it was really more of a "splant," sort of a plant and sort of a split.

According to David, the group that formed the church was a tradition-based remnant of a church that had folded some years before and that had been biding time in another local congregation that had been given funds to oversee the eventual plant.

Once the decision was made to initiate the plant, the recruitment process moved quickly, and David was unanimously elected by the core group to serve as the founding pastor. At the time of his arrival, 80 people had committed to the work.

But David was concerned about the church drifting too far away from their cultural context. "I was really trying to cast the vision of 'We're not going to be a Reformed enclave. We are going to be outward-focused,'" which he indicated was a challenge for the traditionally oriented core group of that church.

Over the next nine years, much of David's vision took hold, and the church grew to over 200 folks while also initiating efforts to purchase property, build a new facility and also become a church planting center for the region. As he put it, "I envisioned myself moving to Louisville, planting SJPC, building the church to about 600, and then planting again."

Unfortunately, problems began to crop up at SJPC, at first with an associate pastor on the church's staff, and then ultimately, with the session. As David put it, "We had an associate pastor leave to go pastor another church, and when he departed, unbeknownst to me, he had talked with some of the elders about concerns regarding my leadership style and asked that they do an intervention with me." At this point, David was already becoming aware of some of his own leadership flaws and beginning to have some "personal aha moments," seeing that he had created an "unhealthy system." These insights set him out on a course to discern how he could "begin to undo this."

However, in spite of the internal struggles, David was still liked by the congregation. According to Ben Gibbs, a ruling elder on the SJPC session, "We had a lot of folks who resonated with his style. It's not like he trampled over the congregation . . . but on the session, that was a little bit of an issue."

About five years into his tenure, as David was beginning to face weaknesses in his leadership style, he sought permission from the leadership of the church to enter into a Doctor of Ministry program to help him develop better habits in shepherding the ministry culture at SJPC. "It was a really a significant time of growth and personal change for me when I realized, 'Ew . . . I love crisis and an anxious system; I've created an anxious system.' So, I started a D.Min. on a topic related to this."

At the same time, the church was experiencing obstacles to some of its larger plans to build on the property it had acquired, and David, in his words, "was losing his passion to preach" which, according to him, was "terrifying" because he wanted to remain at the church for the next twenty years.

In order to complete the course work for his D.Min., David was granted a sabbatical, but just prior to the beginning of his sabbatical, another situation blew up, this time with another staff member and members of the session itself. As David relates it, he and an assistant pastor had had a significant conflict at a session retreat, which initiated a series of meetings between him, the assistant pastor, and members of the session. Just before leaving for his sabbatical, David gave one of the ruling elders the assistant pastor's personnel file along with some notes he'd taken that included observations about the ministry style of the assistant pastor, some of which were positive and some of which were negative. As David remembers, "There were multiple times in that file that I had

written down, 'Does he really want to be doing ministry?' My hope was that during my sabbatical the session would read my notes and meet with him and try to figure out a way forward."

But while conversations between the assistant pastor and session went on during David's sabbatical, it turned into a one-sided situation, according to David, in which the session allowed the assistant pastor and his wife to "air their grievances against me."

According to Ben, the session had a slightly different perspective on what occurred. As one of the elders involved in the conversations, he indicated that he was trying to mitigate the tension. "I was saying, look, when David gets back, we will sit down and work on this."

It didn't take long after the sabbatical ended for things to come to a head. As David recalled, "The day after my sabbatical ended, I met with the session, and in that meeting one of the elders said, 'We've come to the belief that you have really created a toxic work environment here.'"

The next few weeks were difficult, but as David recalls it, his desire to preach was strangely "re-ignited." Even so, he couldn't escape the angst related to being at odds with the session. "That's when I began to wonder for the first time, 'Lord, are you calling me away?'"

Within a few weeks the presbytery shepherding committee had been called in to help mediate the difficulty between David and the session. Ben believed that they were entering into the mediation in good faith and that he and the other elders remained hopeful that things could be worked out. However, this was not to be. Ben described the shocking moment when he and the session learned that David was resigning. "It was

when we were having our first meeting with the shepherding committee that five minutes before that meeting David announced to us that he was leaving. To that point it was never discussed, it was never on our minds. It came way out of left field."

In the days leading up to his decision to leave, David began to believe that the problems at the church were deeper than he had feared and that even his wife was coming to a point of clarity when one of their closest friends in the church had decided to leave. On top of that he said, "It was my assessment that there was still no real willingness among the leaders of SJPC to take responsibility for words said and actions done." Adding to the complication, David had been offered another ministry opportunity elsewhere. For David, all these things tipped the balance toward leaving. "So that's when I took the final decision to move away. So, we felt a calling away and a calling to." As for the session's consideration of transition in general and transition away from the ministry of a founding pastor, according to Ben, they had "never talked about it."

The next few months were a painful dance of separation that ended poorly and took a heavy toll on everyone involved, especially the founding pastor and his family. When asked how he would describe the relationship between himself and the session, David said, "Broken." Interestingly, Ben used the exact same word to describe the current relationship: "broken."

David reflected further on how his wife felt about things. "At present my wife has no intention to ever go back to Louisville. There was a farewell party for us. The elders were there, but none of them spoke. That was really painful." He added, in a somewhat philosophical muse, "You know, there's just a lot of loss in transition, and someone is

going to have to absorb it, and if folks aren't willing to really process it in a healthy way, someone is going to have absorb the unhealthy remnants of it."

Reconciliation Presbyterian Church (RPC) of Chicago

Reconciliation Presbyterian Church (RPC) was a plant of its presbytery birthed with an impetus toward racial reconciliation. The founding pastor, Hank Bailey, had relocated to Chicago to partner with the local presbytery in raising up a core group to build bridges for the PCA into the city's urban community.

For the previous year, Hank had been travelling into Chicago once a month to visit PCA churches and share the vision that the Lord had placed on his heart for racial reconciliation. After finding six core group families and receiving a special gift of $25,000, Bailey finally relocated to Chicago, expecting that it would be another several months before the plant could launch.

But after one living room small group meeting with his core group, he started getting calls and notes from other people who were wanting to join in. Hank realized that his home couldn't accommodate the number of people joining up. "So, me and some friends got on the phone and called around till we found a place to meet." Amazingly, the next Sunday, only ten days after he'd moved to Chicago, seventy-five people showed up for the gathering and according to Bailey, "We were off to the races!"

Over the next twenty years, RPC grew dramatically, eventually reaching five-hundred people. During those years it added multiple ministry platforms, including a school and a local outreach agency, as well as a foreign missions center. The church also added multiple pastoral staff, including an African-american associate pastor.

After twenty years at the helm of RPC, Hank was in his early 50s, the church was going great, and for the first time, transition started to enter his mind. As he tells it:

> I had been aware of some African American churches in areas where I had previously served and there were some older pastors there who had taken younger ministers and mentored them for a number of years and who had very healthy transitions. I saw that and thought, 'okay, that's a good thing to tuck away.'

But the initial idea didn't come together as quickly as Hank thought it might. A couple of years later, the African American associate pastor they had hired made a decision to step away from ministry for a season and the idea for a planned transition had to be filed away.

Then began an exhausting five-year search for another African American associate pastor that finally ended with a call to a young man, about thirty years old, named Mark Thomas. Hank and the session had been searching for a ministry partner who shared their passion for racial reconciliation, but it didn't take long after Mark was settled for Hank to begin to see a much wider range of gifts in him, which began to resurrect his idea for a planned transition, though at this point Hank still wasn't sure that Mark had all the skills necessary to take on the leadership of what had become a fairly complex organization.

Because of this, Hank watched Mark closely for about two years to see if he was truly on board with the vision of the church and possessed the necessary skill set to eventually assume leadership. After beginning to see strong signs of vision solidarity and ministry giftedness, Hank made his move and sat down with him and said: "Hey, I can't promise you this is what's going to happen, but I'd at least like to put this out there for

both of us to be praying about and seeking the Lord on whether or not you might be the person to eventually step into the role of senior pastor."

To this point Hank hadn't yet brought the session into his thinking on a planned transition, but now that he had broached the topic with Mark, he knew it was time. Shane Adams, a long-time elder at Reconciliation, remembered Hank proposing the idea to several elders in an informal setting. "I think Hank floats ideas to look for feedback, and I think he was getting positive feedback on the concept from guys on the session and beyond."

As for Mark, he was positive, though according to him, it wasn't really something he had thought about during the interview process. "Really, when my wife and I came here, we thought we would probably only be here for a couple of years and that we would likely be looking to eventually go somewhere else where I could be a lead pastor."

But because of the relationship between the two men and the many ministry opportunities that Mark had been entrusted with in his first two years, including a commitment to share the preaching 50 percent of the time, when Hank brought the idea to Mark, it didn't seem that daunting. "I think at that time I was less fearful because I had gotten really kind of settled in and comfortable."

The process didn't happen quickly, in fact, it took six more years before much of anything happened. Things went on so long without a lot of conversation from Hank that Mark had begun to wonder if it was time to start looking for other ministry positions as a lead pastor. "I was starting to think that Hank wasn't quite ready for it, and so I was at the point of starting to think, 'OK, I think I'm ready to start exploring whether or not God would have me move back into the role of a lead pastor in another church.'"

For his part Hank knew that he was dragging his feet. He recalled that during those six years of limbo that he'd had a conversation with his own ministry mentor who had inquired with him in a fairly direct way about what he was thinking about the timing of his retirement, to which Hank responded that he "just wasn't sure." But the gentle push from his mentor did convince Hank that he couldn't wait much longer. "After that, it just was more of a growing sense of, 'You know what, I need to do this.'"

Unbeknownst to the session and the associate pastor, "doing this" for Hank wasn't going to be a run of the mill "retire and depart" transition. Since he was only about 60 years old, Hank felt that he had a lot left to give. As he remembers it:

> So, I was very blunt and very honest. I told Mark first, and then I addressed the session. I said, "I feel like I have a lot of work still to do at RPC. I'm not going anywhere. So, I would like to see Mark transition to the senior pastor position, and I would then have the freedom to work in some of these other areas of ministry that we have developed as a church."

The plan that had come into shape in his mind was that Hank would hand over the lead pastor role to Mark and Mark would hand over the associate pastor role to Hank and that they would continue to share the preaching evenly.

The process that followed took two years of meetings between Hank and Mark and the session of RPC before finally being brought forward to the congregation. And when the vote was finally taken it was 99 percent in favor of the exchange of roles that had been proposed.

Shane Adams, one of the ruling elders, reflected on the process, "I think on the whole, for the session, the storyline we presented in this is that it is a good thing. This is a

transition that's not being forced. It's actually being invited. And you know, to that degree it's been celebrated."

Exploring the Research Questions

The participant interviews provided the following answers to the previously stated research questions.

1. In what ways did the church's leadership prepare itself for the transition from the founding pastor to the first successor pastor?

Many Transitions Are Unplanned

In the case of two of the churches, there wasn't any conversation about transition, let alone transition from founding pastor to first successor pastor.

Sam, a ruling elder from Fellowship Presbyterian Church, said, "No, this transition was unforeseen." When asked if it would have been helpful to have had these conversations earlier in the life of the church, he answered with an emphatic, "Yes!"

Ben, a ruling elder from St. John's Presbyterian Church, said virtually the same thing, though he did add, "We did talk a lot about organizational transition but not pastoral transition unless it related to planting a church."

In reflecting on the role that a founding pastor plays in the life of a congregation, Gibbs lamented that the topic was never broached until the departing founding pastor,

David, went on sabbatical, adding that even then, most of the conversations were around how the session could help him better "manage his time and work-life battles."

It wasn't until his sabbatical that David, the founding pastor of SJPC, considered that the transition from founding pastor to first successor pastor was significant. "I was becoming more familiar with the topic while I was on sabbatical . . . but I still wasn't really thinking about it. I thought transition was still fifteen years away!"

Later, after the decision to depart was made, he did try to prompt the session to wrestle with the implications of losing a founding pastor by pointing them to the book, Elephant *in the Boardroom.*[250] But that was the extent of what was discussed on the topic.

Reflecting on the transition event, Ben believes it would have been useful to have something more focused on the transition of the senior pastor, though Paul Johnson, the eventual successor pastor at St. John's, did raise some concerns about detailed succession plans being too idiomatic. As he put it, "The danger of succession planning from the founding pastor to the first successor is that the founding pastor is the one that is going to create it, and he may create one that fits him and not necessarily what the church needs." But, at the same time he thought that being "laisse fare" about the issue isn't good either. In his view, having a "loose plan" or a "loose direction" makes the most sense.

---

[250] Weese and Crabtree, *The Elephant in the Boardroom*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

Some Transitions Are Planned

Scenarios like those at Fellowship Church and St. John's church stand in stark contrast to the situation at Reconciliation Church. There, the succession planning began when the founding pastor was in his early fifties and the church and pastor were thriving.

Shane, a ruling elder at Reconciliation, reflected on what prompted Hank, the founding pastor, to begin processing what transition might look like. "I would just say that I think Hank was seeing negative models in his generation and looking back."

As for establishing rigid models or imitating the successes of other churches, Hank himself warned that the exact model followed at RPC may not work for everyone. According to him, "It all kind of depends on the local situation." Having said that, he was firm when he added, "But I do think that every church, every older pastor, every pastor who's thinking about, 'Hey, am I going to be here forever?' that it's very healthy for them to take a view of actively mentoring someone and beginning to give away leadership as they consider the future of their church."

Section Summary

The data here indicates that those who have gone through a transition from a founding pastor to a first successor, whether planned or unplanned, all agree that it would have been helpful to their process if they had spent time considering and planning for the transition event well before it came upon them.

Factors Related to the Founding Pastor's Engagement in the Pre-Transition Processes

2. What factors in the actual process of transitioning from the founding pastor to the first successor pastor were most influential?

Some Departing Founding Pastors Desire to be Involved in the Transition

In the case of SJPC, even though the founding pastor and the session had agreed that he was leaving, David believed he could still be helpful in preparing to search for the first successor, in spite of the tension between him and the session. He wanted to have the opportunity to speak into the formation of the pulpit search committee because, as he put it, "I wanted them to hire a good guy."

Early on the session did allow him to make some suggestions related to the shape of the committee, but, as time went on and the tension increased, the session made it clear that his input into the transition process would no longer be needed.

Ben, speaking on behalf of the session, indicated that David was "very helpful and very gracious" in assisting in the formation of a pulpit search committee, putting church records in order, and lining up the pulpit supply for several months, but he did add that there were still some "difficult conversations in the midst of all that."

Some Departing Founding Pastors Cannot be Involved in the Transition

In the case of Fellowship Presbyterian Church, because of the burnout and the rapid nature of the founding pastor's departure and the condition in which he departed, he had no formal role in the process. As Sam tells it, "He didn't have any role, other than

leaving well. We really wanted him to leave well -- first tend to his family and stuff. That in itself helped."

Some Departing Founding Pastors are the Architects of a Transition

Conversely, Hank, the founding pastor at Reconciliation Presbyterian Church, drove the whole process of transition. This wasn't a surprise to his session. As Shane, an elder at Reconciliation put it, "So I mean, that's how Hank operates. I don't think anyone was necessarily surprised with the way or the manner in which it came about. But I would say that if there was a surprise, it would be the timing of it, the thinking that this is coming down the road sooner than we thought."

Hank thinks the idea for a planned transition originated with him and not the session because he was still fairly young. "It wasn't on the radar because we were all young. I mean, we were you know, even by that point in my early 50s, none of us were thinking we needed to get ready for the transition." Another factor, something that Hank thinks occurred because of his experience as the founding pastor of the church, was his intimate knowledge of the complexity of the systems at RPC and the realization he was having that it was going to take a lot of preparation to be able to hand them over in a healthy way. "By the time I hit my mid 50s I was just like, 'Okay, this is a pretty complex organization,' and I knew that the idea of simply--out of the blue--trying to find somebody to come in from the outside would never work."

It was also important to him, if he was going to remain on staff, to have a lot of control over the dynamics and timing of the transition. "At a certain point I did, fairly early on, say to the session, 'Hey, we don't know if this is going to happen, and we're all

holding it loosely, but let's just kind of see, let's see where the relationship goes and how this develops. And we're not putting a timetable on it.'"

The session of RPC had a lot of confidence in their founding pastor but that didn't mean that they didn't have concerns. Shane indicated that one major concern had to do with whether or not the associate pastor, Mark, was ready to take on the reins of such a multifaceted ministry and another, co-equal with that, was whether Hank was going to be able to withdraw himself as lead pastor and still be present on the staff in a healthy way.

Factors Related to the Founding Pastors Engagement in the Actual Search Process

Some Departing Founding Pastor's Contribute by Engaging with Candidates

Because the founding pastor at FPC had departed so quickly, he had no role in the development of the search for his successor, but he did agree to meet with Barry in the final phases of the candidating process. This meeting was critical for Barry even though he confessed it was awkward at first. "He gave me some great advice. He said, 'I made the mistake of micro-managing from the outset, and as I tried to undo that, it was too late because people perceived that it was my identity.'"

Some Departing Founding Pastors Do Not Engage with Candidates

At SJPC, once the founding pastor had left Louisville, he had no part in the search process and didn't really talk to the successor pastor during the search process. "I thought he had to make his own way." This was also the recollection of Paul, the successor

pastor, who reported that not only did he not have much contact with his predecessor but that the search committee who engaged him "didn't know a lot of details concerning David's departure." He was glad that the relational difficulties David had experienced with the session and staff had not been allowed to disseminate outside of the session.

Most Successor Pastors are Aware of the Cultural Challenges in Replacing a Founding Pastor

Barry needed to understand the dynamics in replacing a founding pastor because of the failure rate of first successor pastors. In his mind two critical factors freed him to take the calling without heavy trepidation. The first was that Gary had left well, in that he didn't make it "a complete mess" to come in and clean up. Barry also believed that the circumstances related to Gary's burnout and his gradual withdrawal from meaningful pastoring meant that the congregation had likely experienced disappointment and that the bond between them and "their beloved first pastor" may have already been broken.

Paul, the first successor pastor at St. John's, was also aware of the perennial difficulties involved in following a founding pastor and indicated that he'd spent time thinking about it because he had heard that churches can sometimes, "flip to the extreme" in calling a new pastor. He was able to discern from a number of conversations in the candidating phase that he and David were "very different," and that they had "different approaches to ministry."

Even though there was a high degree of trust in place between Mark and Hank at Reconciliation Church, Mark had his own concerns about following the founding pastor

in at RPC. Those concerns had prompted him to acquire the book, *Leading from The Second Chair,* to better understand the dynamics of leadership in a multi-staff church.[251]

Adding to the complication at Reconciliation was the fact that Hank was planning to stay on in another position. Mark was spooked at the proposition at first. "I had never heard of a situation where a former pastor stayed on staff, a successor came behind him, and that the situation had worked out well. Everything I had heard was that that didn't work, wouldn't work, for any number of reasons."

Perhaps even more concerning to Mark was his personal relationship with Hank, which was good at the time but which he was worried might face difficulty. "I just wondered, 'Hey, when these roles reverse, will our relationship maintain? Or will there be conflict that we haven't seemed to have prior to this point?'"

Some Founding Pastors Prefer to Mentor Their Successor

At Reconciliation Church, Hank was deeply invested in the process of developing and readying his successor. Hank believes that the impetus for raising up a successor pastor from his own staff came about as a result of his upbringing as the son of a family business entrepreneur who was a "very good businessman, very successful, but very controlling." He remembered that the family business was limited to what his father could have direct control and management of and that this had severely restricted the business. He reflected, "There's a lot of small businessmen who only want the business to be as big as they can personally manage."

---

[251] Mike Bonnem & Roger Patterson, *Leading from the Second Chair*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

For Hank, his upbringing as the son of a family business founder was significant in his first ministry calling at a different small church but not in a positive way. "I had been the senior pastor of a small church where I was the only guy and I was involved in everything for those six years, and it was a failure on multiple levels." Looking back, Hank can see that he was imitating his father's approach to business and believes the Lord allowed that failure to ready him for the planned transition at Reconciliation.

Even though Hank was aware of his personal tendency to over-control, the early years at Reconciliation still involved challenges in learning to hand off power. Shane, a ruling elder at RPC, pointed out that Hank struggled with relinquishing control in the early days of his ministry at RPC. "You know, seven or eight years before the transition to Mark, Hank had a few relationships with African-American leaders at RPC that ended poorly as he was still learning to relinquish control."

Hank did eventually figure things out, so when it came to his desire to execute a planned transition at RPC, he realized he had to learn to give things up and trust other people to lead. When Mark came on Hank committed himself to doing this as he gave Mark "huge amounts of leadership responsibility and opportunity" even before they had their first conversation about a potential planned transition. "Some sessions have a controlling view of the ministries in the congregation, and some pastors have a controlling view . . . I had struggled with this myself, but now my view is just the opposite . . . our real role is servanthood and equipping."

For Hank, one of the key areas was the pulpit ministry, but he acknowledges that for lead pastors this is the proverbial third rail because when they are called, they view the pulpit as "their pulpit." He added, "If you feel like you're the only one who can

preach, you're going to have a hard time with transition." So, from the very beginning with Mark, Hank was committed to sharing the preaching evenly.

Mark confirmed Hank's view. "We were already sharing the preaching 50/50 when he approached me about the planned transition." And not only that, Mark also indicated that he had been "leading session meetings" and managing a lot of the "internal shepherding of the congregation" from the start.

Section Summary

The data collected from this section of research demonstrates that the context for the transition event will heavily influence the degree to which a founding pastor and session can work together in pursuing the first successor pastor. In contexts in which a crisis transition had occurred, it was far less likely that the founding pastor would play a significant role in the church's transition to his successor than it was in a context in which the transition was planned. Because of the limitations on the study, it was difficult to determine whether crisis transitions were due, in some part, to not having developed a careful plan for transition in advance of the event itself.

Factors Related to Change Dynamics

3. How did the ministry leadership differences between the founding pastor and the first successor pastor impact the process of transition?

Some Churches Going Through Unplanned Transition Desire Radical Change in Ministry Style

At Fellowship Presbyterian Church, there was a strong desire for radical change. According to Sam, the ruling elder initially in charge of the pastoral search, the church was deliberately looking for someone radically different from the founding pastor. "We felt like, personally and corporately, we needed somebody to tell us the truth."

This desire contributed to the development of the ideals that the church was seeking in a successor pastor, who ended up being "just about the opposite" of the founding pastor. When asked how the leadership came to the realization that they needed someone radically different than their founder, Sam said that the idea came into focus when, after their founding pastor had departed, they as a session began to reflect on some work that had been done by a church consultant just prior to the end of Gary's tenure. The consultant had found, "We were sick, our priorities were wrong, and as a result, the diaconate was very ill, the staff was very ill, and the congregation was very ill." This assessment brought the elders at Fellowship Church to the realization that they as a church were not doing well and that they needed a change agent to come in and diagnose what was going on with a fresh perspective and to "help us get healthy again."

Barry, the eventual successor, remembered vividly his conversations with the pulpit search committee and session about this issue. "During the process when I came for the interview, I heard from them that they appreciated the different approach I was going to take."

And indeed, he did end up being quite different than the founding pastor. In reflecting back on the founding pastor's preaching, Sam had a muted view of his effectiveness. "He preached fairly often, I'd say about 80 percent of the time, but it was safe preaching; it wasn't challenging preaching for us. If fact, he took this very long break every summer, which we later found out was actually aggravating to a lot to the congregation."

Conversely, Barry, the successor pastor, is "very prophetic in the pulpit." Barry has picked up on this difference as well and noted that even though they were glad he was different, his preaching "scared" them at first because of how forceful it was. Barry said, "I just felt like there were things that needed to be said in this context that were going to be hard to hear. So, they recognized that, and it scared them, but they knew they needed it because the founding pastor was not a guy who would give application."

As far as shepherding was concerned, the elders saw that Gary, the founding pastor, "was conflict avoidant" and "more hands off," and when it came to discipleship and equipping, he was "a bit more programmatic." This is set in stark contrast with the successor pastor, Barry. Sam said that Barry is the kind of guy who "seeks out the marginal and the fringe and the hard cases and gets really involved with those," adding that "with him we are free to do ministry rather than conform to a set model" and that now "we as a session want to equip our people to get involved in the mission."

One area where Gary, the founding pastor, did seem to excel was with vision casting, which Sam described as being "kind of mapped out and sometimes very detailed." But even here he remembered, "We on the session were kind of encouraged to buy into his vision rather than being a part of crafting it ourselves."

The successor pastor has taken a different approach, which Sam describes as "seeing what the Lord's going to do right now.'" Barry sees himself as more patient in vision casting but also more focused on long term results than was his predecessor. "I am much more willing to let things take time. I think there were times that Gary would alter the vision to try and please a group of people, whereas I am just not going to do that."

According to Sam, Barry's style has been good for the church, but it wasn't without its early casualties. "Barry is going to preach the word, and if somebody's got a problem with that, we try to help them leave well . . . we're really not afraid to say, 'I don't think this is the church for you.'" Barry summed up the most foundational difference between the founding pastor and himself as relating to how they perceived the church. Barry says, "The best way I can illustrate the difference is that the founding pastor had an institutional view of the church and I have a familial view of the church. I knew that this difference could cause some problems for the session and for the congregation."

This radical change did cause a lot of "whiplash" for the congregation at first, because they were used to a certain programmatic way of doing things, but eventually it took hold and has been "very good" for the growth and vitality of the church.

Some Churches Going Through Unexpected Transition Desire Measured Change

At St. John's in Louisville, the transition was unexpected, but the contributions of the founding pastor and many of his ministerial leadership qualities were still broadly appreciated, and the areas where he and the successor pastor were different were often couched in gray-scale language rather than black and white terminology.

According to Ben, "I think most of the people in the congregation feel that David, the founding pastor, left a very good legacy in this church. There are a few with scars but most of those are personal. I think if he were walking through these doors, he gets a hug from most people."

As far as pulpit ministry is concerned, Ben doesn't see radical differences. Both men would preach about "eighty-five to ninety percent of the time," and both are "excellent expositors of the word." If there is a difference, he says that it shows up in the areas of illustration and application. "Paul, the successor pastor, is more wholistic in the way he illustrates whereas Dave would be very sports-based in the pulpit with his illustrations. I also think that Paul is also a little heavier on application whereas David was a little bit more focused on exposition."

For his part, Paul didn't ever hear the founding pastor preach, but based on feedback from the congregation, he's gotten the sense that David was "a little more formal, whereas I'm fairly animated, I move around a lot, I tell stories, I wear blue jeans and a bow tie."

When it came to shepherding, Ben indicated that both men are gifted relationally, but "the older folks feel more paid attention to by Paul." Upon reflection, he thought that some of this might have had something to do with David, the founding pastor's previous role as a college minister. Paul was made aware of David's relational gifts before he took the calling. "I was told before I came by a former staff person at SJPC, 'You can't out relationship David. No one can, so don't even try.'"

The same sense of consistency holds true in terms of equipping, with one notable exception related to how the founding pastor equipped and managed the session.

According to Ben, there was a growing sense of tension in terms of how David viewed the session. "One time," according to Ben, "David called us the JV team." This comment led to a later conversation in which it became clear that David was a three-office guy and the session were two-office guys.[252]

According to Ben, "If we had known that earlier on, it would have helped us to understand and manage the dynamics a little bit better." David sees this also in retrospect. "I was an over-functioner, so I don't think I prepared the elders to really and truly lead."

When it came to the search process for the successor pastor, Ben indicated that one of the things high on their search agenda was a teaching elder who had a high view of ruling elders and who believed that their calling was on par with his because, "we didn't want a three-office guy."

Another area at SJPC where there was a greater sense of discontinuity between the founding pastor and the successor pastor was in relation to their view of vision-casting and strategic planning. According to Ben, on a scale of 1-10, Paul, the successor pastor, would be a "7," and David, the founder, would be a "17." He added, "David was very focused on vision-casting and big picture kind of things. Paul isn't a huge fan of strategic planning. When David did vision-casting, he involved the session as advisors but didn't give them a lot of authority, whereas Paul is still involved in vision-casting, but he is more hands-off." Paul concurs that this is definitely an area of difference. "David

---

[252] The three-office view sees a strong contrast between the offices of teaching elder, ruling elder and deacon whereas the two-office view sees a strong continuity and overlap of the roles of teaching and ruling elder which are sharply distinguished from the role of deacon and prefers to emphasize that ultimately there are elders and there are deacons.

was very big picture, vision-oriented kind of guy, and I am much more day-to-day type of person. You know, 'Let's be together, let's invest in our community.'"

If there was a desire for stronger contrast between the ministry approach of the founding pastor and the successor pastor at SJPC, at least among the elders, it may have been in the overall ministry approach of the pastor. As the session at SJPC wrestled with forming the job description and personal leadership style of the first successor pastor, they realized that they needed more of a manager as opposed to a builder. By "builder" Ben said, "I mean someone who comes in and builds and establishes and charges the top of a hill then moves on, whereas a manager is someone who maintains and moves us at a more consistent and steadier pace."

Paul recognized this difference early in the candidating process, which has been affirmed in his first few years at SJPC.

> The way I describe it is that David had 1,000 ideas and 998 of them needed to be implemented yesterday. So, he was kind of a hard charger: 'Here's the hill I'm going to take, try to keep up.' Whereas I'm a little more methodical; slower to change; I want to make sure that everyone gets a chance to weigh in; I like to build consensus rather than pulling from the front.

Reflecting on how this change has been accepted among the leadership at SJPC, Paul said, "I think they feel more heard now. They aren't just here to get their marching orders or to rubber stamp things," which has been very good for the church.

Some Churches Going Through Planned Transition Prefer Incremental Change

At Reconciliation Presbyterian Church, the absolutely core values consisted of a commitment to the vision of racial reconciliation, shared preaching, and shared pastoral ministry. According to Hank, the founding pastor, this common ground "made the transition very smooth and there was an immediate embrace."

These shared core values were of critical importance for worship on Sunday morning. If the transition was going to work, things had to feel the same for the congregation. So, even though Mark was becoming the senior pastor and Hank was becoming the associate pastor, it was critical that they continue to share the preaching evenly, that they continue to have communion weekly, and that the shape of their worship services should not change. Now that the roles have been swapped, the situation has remained the same, leading Shane to say, "I don't think the congregation sees a lot of difference on a Sunday morning."

Although Hank and Mark are committed to the same fundamental core values, they aren't the same in every way. Shane says that their preaching is different stylistically.

> In terms of preaching style, they are definitely different. With Mark
> you're going to get African-american idioms and expressions that you
> won't from Hank. And age-wise, there's definitely a difference there too.
> Hank's going to have an older person's perspective, and Mark's going to
> have a younger person's perspective.

Mark agreed with Shane's assessment about preaching style:

> I think we're similar in terms of, again, just vision and mission and
> approach to the Bible, but very different in terms of how we
> communicate in the pulpit. I'm much more interactive with the
> congregation; much more call and response; I'm a lot louder than Hank;
> much more humorous in the pulpit, so I tell lots of jokes. Just trying to

engage the congregation. If I could say this not in a negative way,
Hank's more paternal. He's like a father talking to his son or one of his
kids.

But because the preaching had been shared evenly well before the transition and

was being shared evenly after the transition, the common refrain at RPC was: "It hasn't

changed much at all from the perspective of the congregation" which most count as a

good thing.

Preaching style isn't the only area where the two men were different. Shane also

noticed that they've gone from a CEO mentality under Hank to a consensus mentality

under Mark. Mark notes, "I can tell that they're not used to the consensus style of

leadership. They're used to the leader always being the one saying, 'There's the hill over

there, let's take it!' versus, 'What's the hill you all want us to take together?' And that's

been hard . . . harder than I thought it would be."

Shane recounted an example related to a need for the church to address a

breakdown in the children's ministry soon after the transition had occurred. When the

breakdown reached a significant point, Shane said that Mark ended up calling a meeting

for all the families in the children's ministry to address the situation. According to Shane,

"That's not too unusual for most churches, but it's actually unusual traditionally at RPC

because if Hank was still leading, we probably wouldn't even have had the meeting."

Instead, Shane says that Hank would've probably figured out how to fix the situation and

then made or directed the fixes himself. Going on, Shane finished the story:

So, Mark has the meeting and gets a lot of tough questions and it's a
really messy meeting and at the end of the meeting Mark calls a spade a
spade, and says, 'Hey guys, we're not there yet.' So, he calls another
meeting and everybody's like, 'What? Is he actually expecting us to have
input about what to do here?' So that was, for the congregation, a

learning point in terms of how Mark's leadership is different from Hank's.

Even though these moderate changes have been difficult, Mark believes that the session and congregation have appreciated them. "I think they actually wanted that. I think they were looking for the opportunity to be more involved in that way. And so, I haven't really had any pushback from the session or congregation about that style of leadership."

Since the transition, Hank has seen the differences in leadership style and even some missteps. That said, he made the commitment for the first couple of years to hold his tongue. "I didn't speak very much even though I did see him making what I thought were just little mistakes, not sins but just things he could have done better or differently. But I just thought, if he wants to come to me and ask me, I'm here."

Section Summary

The data uncovered in this section suggests that change, in key areas of ministry leadership during pastoral transition, is inevitable. However, many respondents indicated that churches that suffered through an unplanned transition were more open to foundational change than those that had worked through a planned transition. Those who had worked through a process of planned transition were accepting of stylistic modifications in the approach of the successor pastor.

Factors Related to the Actions of the Founding Pastor

4. Which overall factors were most influential in the eventual outcome of the transition from the founding pastor to the first successor pastor?

Negative Factors in Founding Pastors' Ministry Styles that Critically Shape Transition Dynamics

At Fellowship Presbyterian Church, the successor pastor, Barry, suggested that the founding pastor's tendency to over-concentrate authority and decision making in his office made it difficult for the church to transition. "I had to overcome the micro-management stuff. It's taken some of our people years to feel ownership themselves."

Leaders at SJPC said something similar about the ministry style of the founding pastor, David. "I think his not involving the session at a deeper level did hinder our growth. He would make decisions on things that we didn't know about, and then we would get questions from the congregation on some of this stuff, and we just didn't know what was going on."

David was vulnerable in confirming this. "I modeled an unhealthy approach to ministry by my constant over-working."

Even at Reconciliation Church, where the transition went well, there was a lingering sense of irritation with the founding pastor's tendency to centralize management of the church under his authority. Shane, a ruling elder at RPC said, "We can, with a chuckle and a smile, look back and say, 'You know, Hank was a CEO type leader, and he was out front and looking behind him all the time,' like, 'Hey, where is everybody? You guys haven't caught up yet?' Yeah, and decisions were made, and you kind of found out later."

Another negative factor was when the founding pastor allowed personal pain to undermine the transition. David saw his personal pain as a problem as his tenure was winding down. "I think my own hurt during the process probably made it more difficult for everyone. I might've been too resistant to being called elsewhere for too long."

Equally important to note was when founding pastors failed to have open and trusting communication with the rest of the church leadership. According to Sam, if their founding pastor at Fellowship Church had given them some warning about his burnout, it might have smoothed the process of transition. "It was just the timing of it all with him not coming clean earlier on about what was going on with him. That was the one thing that still bothers me. If he had come to us, maybe at the beginning of that calendar year, it might not have been so hard."

Hank had one self-critique concerning his role in the transition at Reconciliation Church where a significant amount of time passed between his first mentioning the idea of a planned transition and actually doing it. "I think I could have, for as well as things went, done a better job of keeping Mark in the loop, because mind you, he was with us for eight years before the transition took place, and there were six years between the idea and the event." Hank believes he should have continued to have regular communication with Mark about how the transition process was unfolding.

Positive Factors in Founding Pastors' Ministry Styles that Critically Shape Transition Dynamics

At Fellowship Church, even though the transition was difficult due to Gary's burnout, he continued to demonstrate humility at critical moments during the transition.

Barry, his successor, was particular grateful for this. "Gary showed a lot of humility. He did not leave scorched earth. He didn't do underhanded things that a lot of pastors do when they leave. He just did it well. He left with kindness and humility. He didn't blow anything up or set fire to things."

This overall sense of humility was also critical to the positive transition at Reconciliation Church, according to both Shane and Mark. Shane said that Hank showed tremendous humility by being willing to initiate the transition and follow it through to the end. Mark concurred, saying, "Hank's ability to humbly submit and to allow me to lead in the direction that I feel like the Lord is leading us was key. And I wasn't sure about that; quite frankly, I just didn't know how that would work, but it has."

A second positive factor was the sharing of the pulpit ministry. Hank is convinced that the shared pulpit ministry was central to the smooth transition at Reconciliation Church. "From the very beginning, I shared the preaching 50/50." He also happily confessed the benefits of doing this. "I love having multiple preachers. For one thing, since I don't have to prepare every single Sunday, I get to be fed! This also means that after the transition was complete, it's all still the same for the congregation on Sunday mornings, even though behind the scenes there's a lot of change."

Equipping and empowering leaders was another big positive factor. Despite the difficulties of their transition at Fellowship Church, Sam believes that the departing founding pastor did a good job equipping the session. "Gary always tried to empower us. He didn't always model it well for us, but he empowered us well."

Cultivating a strong sense of community in the congregation aided transitions as well. St. John's had its share of difficulties with the transition from founding pastor to

first successor pastor, but Ben, an elder at SJPC, believes that the founding pastor's emphasis on building a strong relational community was critical to their survival. "David was committed to community groups, and these community groups built discipleship, which gave us the strength to weather the storms in the church and in our lives." David also believes that this community building aided the church throughout the bumpy transition. *"What I hope I did well was to wed our theological distinctives to relational ministry."*

Factors Related to the Actions of the Session

Negative Factors in Sessions Facing Transition

From his time on the session at Fellowship Church, Sam lamented its failure to connect the dots that things weren't going well with the church or the founding pastor. "We should have been more in tune with the signs. You know, fool me once...shame on you, fool me twice...shame on me."

Not being proactive in considering transition dynamics for the founding pastor also adversely affected transitions. Representatives of all three churches agreed that they should have been more proactive in wrestling with the dynamics of pastoral transition in general and founding pastor transition in specific, all saying something akin to what one leader said. "I think it would have been very helpful to wrestle with transition from a founding pastor to the first successor a little bit more."

Mark, the successor pastor at Reconciliation church, added another layer of insight from their healthy transition: "I just don't think those guys on the session were ready for everything involved in this transition, so I don't know that they were prepared

as much to consider that they had a real voice in giving shape to what the founding pastor was going to do in terms of his job description." This insight was reinforced when Shane, one of the ruling elders, noted that the session should have spent a lot more time being proactive about "defining the organizational chart" and "job description" of the founding pastor who was moving out of the role and into the associate pastor role.

Related to this, but coming from the angle of a founding pastor, Hank thought that sessions should be more proactive in anticipating the complicated dynamics of concluding the tenure of a long-term founding pastor.

> I just think churches, if they've got pastors for whom they've not been in a position to give them sufficient resources to establish a solid retirement, then they ought to be having an open dialogue, especially if that pastor has been there for a long time to say, 'Look, this man's given us a life for this. Yeah, we need to support him and figure out how to make this work for him.

Positive Strategies in Sessions Facing Transitions

In spite of the negatives covered, leaders in each of the church's also saw positive things that sessions had done in their unique transition situations.

Establishing core values aided transition. Hank affirmed the importance of the session taking responsibility for owning the vision and deepening their commitment to that vision even before the process of transition. "Because of our unique vision, the session was always having to wrestle with the diversity of leadership and team ministry in very practical ways." This ongoing evaluation resulted in viewing the planned transition as "just a normal part of how we operate."

Another positive factor was daring to dream about the beauty of a continuing ministry storyline. The planned succession approach of Reconciliation Church enabled

the session to reinforce and underline the overall health of the church and its long-term ministry successes. Shane, reflecting on the successful transition said, "I think on the whole for the session, the storyline we are presenting in this planned succession is a good thing. This is a transition that's not being forced. It's actually being invited." Mark, the successor pastor at RPC heartily agreed. "In my own opinion, doing it the way we did it is much healthier in that the founding pastor gets to be here and see the continued fruitfulness of God's work in the church he was a part of starting."

And Hank added that the model he was using was also being followed by another close friend in ministry. "I have a friend in another denomination and he's maybe five, six years older than I am. It's a smaller congregation than ours but he's been there for forty years, and this is exactly the same kind of approach that that he's taken. And it's worked really, really well."

The value of an interim pastor also aided in transition. Several leaders interviewed mentioned that, in various ways, having an interim pastor come in after the departure of the founding pastor made it "much easier for the successor when he came in." One successor pastor added that he thought having the interim pastor was actually "very helpful" in relieving some of his fears about the transition, especially because it was clear that the interim pastor had "no interest in the job" and that the session had been clear that he "would not be a candidate" for the senior pastor position.

Maintaining confidence about difficult interpersonal dynamics also proved to be a key positive factor. The transition at SJPC was birthed in conflict between the founding pastor, the staff, and the session, but one ruling elder emphasized how important it was to maintain confidentiality about those difficulties. "One of the guys that came on the

session after the departure of the founding pastor said to me, 'You guys are pretty good at confidentiality . . . we played golf the day after some of these tough moments of conflict were happening, and I had no idea what was going on.'" At SJPC they worked hard to protect the successor pastor, Paul, from unnecessary exposure to some of the more painful details. "I think the amount of detail they gave me was fine because I don't think that they were withholding any information that I needed to know that would've altered my decision. I think they were trying to respect the process that they had been through and were trying to make sure that they were honoring David."

The leaders at SJPC also appreciated efforts to deepen relationships with each other during the interim. Ben said that the prospect of facing such a difficult transition compelled the session to "build relationships with one another and each other's wives by having dinner together once a month," which was essential, in his opinion, to their ability to "make it through the darkest days of the transition."

One big picture factor was the commitment to buckle up for the bumpy ride. The transition ride at Fellowship Church was difficult but according to Barry, the session at FPC "hung in there through a tough season. They stayed around. So, I didn't have to come into an empty leadership cupboard." Sam, a member of that session agreed. "I think one the things we did well was assuming leadership even when we were getting it wrong, and people knowing that we wouldn't abdicate. We stood fast." Shane, a ruling elder at Reconciliation Church, which had a comparatively smooth transition, echoed some of the same sentiments:

> We held on. We didn't quit. We stayed with it. I think we learned to be
> gracious with both men through the process. You know, the gospel itself
> tells us that we all messed up and that God gives us his grace and calls us
> to live out his love. So, for the session, we knew that Hank was going to

mess up and we knew that Mark was going to mess up, but we were committed to loving them and celebrating their successes when they did well and walking with them when they messed up.

Protecting the successor pastor mattered for the health of the entire church. Initial successor pastors are always in the position of greatest peril in a transition. As Mark, the first successor pastor at RPC put it, "I had never heard of a situation where a pastor stayed on staff, a successor came behind him, and that situation worked out well. Everything I had heard was that that didn't work, wouldn't work, for any number of reasons. And so, I had a lot of apprehension about whether or not it would work." He went on to describe the complicated dynamics he faced:

> The guy you're inviting in to be your new leader, you don't want him to be in the crosshairs of the founding pastor. So you just make sure, especially in cases where that founding pastor is thinking he will stay and not go, that you're protecting the successor from having to deal with a founding pastor who is not truly ready to step out of leadership, and so some of that is just, you know, those boundaries, those lines of authority, being clear.

All three of the successor pastors agreed that sessions have to protect them from unfair criticism. Paul, the first successor pastor at SJPC, summarized a refrain about what sessions should be doing as they onboard a first successor pastor. "Be loose with the way things have been. Be open to change. I'm not saying to give a blank check, but don't use the 'we've never done it that way' excuse. And I would say, be honest with expectations for the successor pastor and his wife."

Barry connected the idea of confidentiality between the successor pastor and the session as they work through transition dynamics to his role as a stepfather relating to his wife and step kids:

I said to my wife, the only way this works is if you and I disagree, it can never be in front of the kids. Now, I am sometimes wrong at the top of my lungs. So, I said to the session, push back on me, but don't do it in front of the congregation. If we divide in that way, parties will form, and this thing will fall apart. I think also respecting that these are her kids when it comes to discipline. In the same way, I was aware of where some of the issues were with individual elders and individuals in the congregation. Actually, being a stepdad made me more careful about how I talked about things with everyone.

Factors Related to the Actions of the Successor Pastor

Honoring the Legacy of the Founding Pastor

In spite of the need for radical change at Fellowship Presbyterian Church, Barry felt it was still critical to honor Gary's legacy. He would mention as many of the good things about him from the pulpit as he could and not try to rewrite the church's history. "I think the history is very important. We still have about 20 percent of the people he had when he was here. There are a number of people that came to Christ through his ministry. So, I would refuse to let people bad-mouth him or try to compare us . . . even though they had been operating in the chaos for so long."

The transition from founding pastor to first successor pastor at Reconciliation Church was clearly different than that at Fellowship Church. Even so, both men at RPC have worked hard to honor one another in front of the congregation. As Mark put it, "I think verbally in front of the congregation, we always speak positively of one another. I think we both practice and communicate team work to the congregation in terms of vision and what we're doing together, and Hank's always been very supportive of me in public."

At St. John's, while Paul values the legacy of the founding pastor, he doesn't think it's necessary to go out of the way to make a big deal about it in public, having only

131

mentioned it in a worship service "once or twice" and adding, "I just don't invoke the ghost of pastors past." For him, he's not interested in SJPC being the kind of church that needs to hang a long line of pastoral portraits on the wall. "I just don't think that's a very healthy long-term pattern." That said, Paul went out of his way to make sure that his predecessor knew that he respected his work at the church by writing a letter to him to tell him that he "sees his fingerprints all over this church in very good ways," and there was no question in his mind that he was "the right person to plant this church."

When the founding pastor remains on the church staff in a different role, as was the case at Reconciliation Church, the need to honor his legacy is even more complex and Shane, a ruling elder at RPC, thinks Mark has done an excellent job of constantly demonstrating "respect" for Hank's unique legacy as the founding pastor of the church.

Being Willing to Enter the Church's Brokenness to Bring Needed Change

Sam acknowledges the weaknesses of the transition at Fellowship Church but gave huge credit to the successor pastor, Barry, for being willing to enter the fray and be a positive agent for change. "Now I wouldn't say what we've done here is a model to follow but in the long run, the positive things that have happened are largely due to Barry coming in from day one and telling us the truth about where we really were. He didn't let us just sit there."

Sensing and Adjusting When Change May be Too Radical

First successor pastors need to be sensitive to when they are pushing the envelope of change too hard. At St. John's, Paul made an effort to implement a different approach

in worship by permitting non-elders to read scripture. According to him, "It didn't go over too well" because it stood in stark contrast to a clearly articulated conviction held by the founding pastor. This shift prompted feedback that the practice was "devaluing the office of the pastor." As a result, Paul relented and said, "I'm not going to die on this hill" even though he and the session had agreed to make the change, and in retrospect he believes it was the right decision.

Factors Related to Loss in the Transition Process

It was David, the founding pastor at St. John's who said, "You know, there's just a lot of loss in transition, and someone is going to have to absorb it. And if folks aren't willing to really process it in a healthy way, someone is going to have to absorb the unhealthy remnants of it." Without denying that others in the church and on the session also experienced real pain and loss, some of it at his own hands, David believes that he and his family bore the brunt of the loss at St. John's.

Commenting on the meetings during the transition, he said, "I had given them everything for nine years, and they were asking me to pay back a very small amount of money related to an insurance payment. Honestly, it all felt very transactional . . . really painful." In terms of the loss experienced by his family, and especially his wife, he said, "At present my wife has no intention of ever going back to Louisville," and growing even more personal, he noted that his wife's loss was maybe "the most painful thing" for him because of his own besetting sin of workaholism. "I had sinned by selling my own family down the river. So, for her to feel like she had first been sinned against by me by having the church as a 'mistress' and then to be sinned against by the 'mistress' itself, the church

. . . she was just really hurt. Unfortunately, the more data I gave her, the more painful it was for her."

Just before he became aware that their founding pastor was burning out, Sam recalled that the key scripture verse the founding pastor kept bringing up was Proverbs 12:10: Hope deferred makes the heart grow sick. Only after the pastor had left did he realize why. "Honestly I think his heart had grown sick. He was unhealthy, and honestly we became unhealthy after him." He added with lament, "When you're in burnout mode, it's hard to make decisions. You lose your decisiveness; you lose your emotional regulation. And that's definitely where he was."

Sam deeply lamented the fact that his founding pastor and wife "had been hurt" during their years of ministry at FPC, and as a result they had built up defense mechanisms that had "walled them off" from others, something that remains in their lives "even to this day."

And personal pain in transition isn't felt only by founding pastors; it's felt by remaining church leaders as well. Sam became the collection point for the pain being experienced by the departing founding pastor, the session, and the congregation, even as he struggled to try and keep the church from falling apart during the transition. "I actually had to pull back from eldering. I was still involved, but I just got to a point where I felt that I might start doing some damage because I wasn't controlling my own anger well."

Though the day hasn't yet come when Hank fully steps away from ministry at RPC, and while there have been small areas where challenges have occurred in the transition, it was difficult to find evidence of significant pain and loss in the Reconciliation Church transition.

Hank explained why. "In my personal conversations with Mark, what I said to him was, it is only to my great advantage that you succeed and so in everything I'm doing my intention is going to be to help equip you and have you succeed." To get there he noted what he thought the most significant practical issue was in the success of their transition (aside from the clear blessing of the Lord). "I had to be willing to give stuff up. I was just thinking, if Mark's going to have room to step into the leadership role, I've got to' find ways to step out."

He reflected on how friends and colleagues had interacted with him about making a decision to transition out of the leadership role in his early 60s. "I think many of them have the wrong mindset. My ministry is not diminished at all by having Mark take over the leadership. What's happening is exactly what I want to see happen." What he meant was that it was his greatest desire to see the next generation of leadership thriving because he couldn't think of a better outcome than for the ministries of the church to "go on well into the next generation."

For Hank this approach wasn't significantly different than what he took in learning to parent his own adult, and now married, son.

> He's taking on family responsibilities, and you are learning how to relate to him in a different kind of way. And you know, there's boundaries you don't want to cross, and there are areas that you don't want to press in on him. Instead, you want to invite, and you want to encourage and only if it's a real rough issue will you considering going to have a little father to son talk.

Speaking on his long-term future, he said that everyone is still enthusiastic about his remaining on staff, as is he. "It just so happens that I want to keep working. I've got the

physical health and mental capacity to keep doing it. And there's lots of work still to be done."

Section Summary

Under this heading, positive and negative factors were listed, each related to all the key players in a ministry transition. Humility, open communication, honoring one another, and having a strong set of core values were all useful for increasing the health of a transition, whereas the over-centralization of ministry leadership, a lack of transition foresight, and a lack of sensitivity to the personal emotions of individuals who play key roles in transitions all contributed to pain and loss in the transition.

Summary of Chapter Four

This chapter surveyed founding pastors (FP), ruling elders (RE) and first successor pastors (SP) representing three congregations that had all experienced a recent transition from a founding pastor to a first successor pastor. The research questions sought clarity on the most influential factors in the process of transition. While each transition had its own unique context, many of the principles related to the struggles and successes of transitions were discernable and can be summarized to offer assistance to other churches as they enter into the period of a first transition.

Chapter 5

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how church leaders describe influential factors in the process of transitioning from the founding pastor (FP) to the first successor pastor (SP).

Summary of Study and Findings

In chapter two experts in a number of fields revealed much wisdom for churches as they navigate the transition from their founding pastor to the first successor pastor.

First, we observed what experienced ministry leaders define as their core ministry categories. It is in these categories that all pastors, and perhaps especially successor pastors, will be measured by church members during seasons of transition. See Table 1.

Second, we surveyed two important biblical stories of transition, one successful (Moses to Joshua) and one unsuccessful (Samuel to Saul), looking for insights related to the reasons for their respective success and failure.

Third, we surveyed the insights of experts on stepfamilies regarding the challenges that crop up in a family context when a new parental figure enters a home and fills the role of the departed parental figure and observed clear comparisons between the roles in a stepfamily and the roles in a church going through its first pastoral transition. See Table 2.

Fourth, we similarly examined the research of experts in the area of business leadership transition and noted interesting comparisons between the key players in a business transition and the roles of church leaders going through transition. See Table 3.

Finally, we took note of the insights of experts in all the surveyed fields regarding what congregations should be asking as they approach the daunting task of initial transition. We noted in this final section that limited attention had been paid to transition from a founding pastor to a first successor pastor.

To delve further, the study surveyed founding pastors (FP), ruling elders (RE) and first successor pastors (SP) representing three congregations that had experienced a recent transition from a founding pastor to a first successor pastor. While each transition had its own context, many of the principles that emerged related to the struggles and successes of these transitions can assist churches in preparing to face their own initial transition.

Discussion of Findings

One of the long terms hopes for this study has been to give founding pastors, church planting core groups, and church sessions working alongside a founding pastor the tools to heighten their awareness as they approach the inevitability of initial transition and to suggest principles and strategies helpful in making the transition a healthy one.

Since this study began as a qualitative study that draws from anecdotal evidence and observations, some insights may have a one-size-fits-all feel. That said, to avoid unnecessary pain and loss, founding pastors and church sessions can consider the

following seven principles for navigating the initial transition process, especially if the founding pastor is over fifty years old or within fifteen years of potential retirement.[253,254]

1. Principle #1: Every Pastor is an Interim Pastor

2. Principle #2: Founding Pastors Make a Unique Mark

3. Principle #3: Plan for Transition Now

4. Principle #4: Continually Recalibrate Your Ministry Culture for Smoother Transition

5. Principle #5: Transition Isn't Over when the New Pastor is Installed

6. Principle #6: Engage the Inevitable Loss in Transition

7. Principle #7: Even in Difficult Initial Transitions Hope Remains

Principle #1: Every Pastor Is an Interim Pastor

As Vanderbloemen stated, "Succession occurs inevitably and repeatedly, whether it's a first pastorate or a tenth pastorate," and so "Every pastor is an interim pastor."[255] And yet, because Christians long for meaningful and long-lasting relationships, developing an interim mindset regarding pastors feels, in some ways, like a betrayal. While this is understandable, Christians can shift their perspective toward embracing the long story of God's faithfulness to his people, which includes all the leaders he has used to ensure a faithful legacy, so that any sense of betrayal can be mitigated.

---

[253] The framework for this study applies specifically to churches making the transition from a founding pastor to a first successor pastor. That said, in cases where there is a legacy pastor that has been in place over a long period of time, church sessions can draw some guidance from these principles.

[254] Aronoff, McClure, and Ward, *Family Business Succession,* 15.

[255] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 9-10.

In chapter two Moses had a unique place in the history of God's people, but it was God's intention to use Joshua to take his people into the promised land. The fact that Joshua was God's agent for entry into the land doesn't diminish the leadership of Moses, and neither does Moses' role in leading the people out of Egypt diminish Joshua's military skillset in conquering the promised land. These were two leaders equipped for two different seasons in the history of God's people who were followed by other leaders, some better than others, that still advanced the covenant purposes of God. Paul, the first successor pastor at SJPC, underlined this when he said that he saw his predecessor's fingerprints all over the church "in very good ways" and that there was no question in his mind that the founding pastor was "the right person to plant this church," even though Paul was taking the church in a different direction from that of the founding pastor.

This proper perspective leads churches to understand the principle of the perpetual interim pastor. However, when this principle isn't embraced, many organizations, including churches, often resist succession planning. In chapter two, in the literature from the world of business, it was noted that many CEO's proved uninterested in transition strategies when they were new on the job.

> CEO's, though, are generally ambivalent about engaging in succession planning. In the beginning stages of their tenure, the CEO's focus is appropriately on the business-at-hand, driving his or her strategic agenda, aligning with the board, and developing a working relationship with the senior team. CEO's are not thinking about the end of their tenure, but rather the demands and challenges of the here and now.[256]

---

[256] Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession*, 199.

This mentality isn't confined to the world of business; it also rings true in the world of church planting which, like the business world, places a strong focus on the entrepreneurial skills of the founding pastor. Short and intermediate term results are often emphasized. This short and intermediate term focus can become so common within the structure of a new church that the founding pastor and initial core leadership team can lose sight of the fact that one day the leadership will shift to a new core team, and often much sooner than anticipated.

Unfortunately, under these circumstances, the seeds for difficult transitions are often sewn unwittingly. But if church plants can embark with an appropriate perspective on the tenure of the founding pastor, one of the most important steps toward a healthier transition will already have been taken.

Principle #2: Founding Pastors Make a Unique Mark

Many of the experts in the field of pastoral succession merge the category of founding pastor with that of a legacy or long-term pastor. While I understand why, it's my conviction that while both long-term pastors and founding pastors have a unique place in the life of a church, there will only ever be one founding pastor.

Ted Powers, the church planting coordinator for the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), explains: "For one reason, the church has become very attached to the planter and identifies more strongly with him than in a church where they may have had

multiple pastors over the years. There is more of a sense that he is the church vs. we are the church. We were here before him, and we'll be here after him.'"[257]

So, what is it about founding pastors that makes them so unique?

Founding Pastors are Original Culture Makers

I contend that founding pastors are culture makers, whereas those that follow them are culture shapers. A founding pastor will lay the first foundations of a church's sense of what it is, and all the pastors that follow will only be adding to or adapting to that first structure in the life of the church.

One first successor pastor from chapter two noted her struggle in coming to understand this issue.

> As time went by, it became apparent that the most daunting issues of the transition had much less to do with my being a woman than with my not being my predecessor. Forty-two years is a long time, and people had become accustomed to having things done a certain way. Whatever I suggested felt revolutionary to some, even if it was nothing more major than moving the church mailbox.[258]

Illustratively, the same may be said of the original sanctuary in a church facility. Even if it was built generations before and a whole new complex of flashy buildings have grown up around it, maybe even a whole new sanctuary, people still speak in hallowed terms about the old structure. They tell stories about how it came into being, reminiscing about events that occurred there.

---

[257] Ted Powers, RE: Dissertation Research, "Email to Chris Polski" (September 29, 2017).

[258] Schnase, *Transitions*, 16.

Similarly, the ministry of a founding pastor leaves a first imprint on the life of a church that is esteemed by the generations that follow, especially by those with personal memories of his having preached the church's first sermon, conducted its first baptism, led its first communion service, performed its first wedding, and conducted the first funeral. All these evocative firsts become deeply embedded in the psyche of the congregation alongside practical firsts such as the founding pastor's preaching methodology, shepherding approach, leadership style, and more.

Since the Lord calls his people to remember their origins, first successor pastors need to try to understand these origins if they wish to have longer term success.

Founding Pastors Are Original Values Synergizers

Another reason for ascribing a unique place to a founding pastor is that the core values of the founding pastor closely resonate with the core values of the people who first join. Either an existing core group with deeply embedded core values unites with a planting pastor closely adhering to that same list or, more commonly, the synergy is developed via a planting pastor forming a core group whose core values closely align to his own. Such consonance creates an extraordinary level of synergy that will likely never be repeated in that particular congregation.

This is one of the chief reasons why the transition from the founding pastor to the first successor pastor is more complicated than any other. It's also what makes the bonds between a founding pastor and their core group intense, not unlike the bonds between children and their biological parents. One expert on stepfamilies noted that "The bond between the parent and child is one of life's strongest—stronger, one might argue, than

the bond between the parent and new mate."[259] As a result, when any of the core values of the original pastorate are violated, the consequences can be painful and intense.

Founding Pastors Are Original System Immunizers

When the core values of a founding pastor and original core group are embraced by all the parties, the founding pastor can rapidly inculcate them into the ministries of the church. Doing this, according to Bridges and Bridges, is like immunizing the congregation against ideas or systems that go against the fundamental commitments in the organization. "Every organizational system has its own natural 'immune system' whose task it is to resist unfamiliar, and so unrecognizable, signals."[260] As a result, the cultural values of the founding pastor and core group are deeply embedded in the music ministry, children's ministry, youth ministry, pulpit ministry, and more. Once this immunizing process begins, the core cultural values become like white blood cells to keep any perceived threats to the system at bay.

One example of this inoculation might be inflexibility regarding the musical style of a church plant. If the musical style is ensemble-based and a group tries to enter the congregation and insist on a choir-based approach, the core leadership group is either going to insist that if the newcomers wish to assimilate they will have to relinquish their efforts or conversely that they try to find another church that aligns better with their

---

[259] Moseley and Moseley, *Making Your Second Marriage a First-Class Success*, 117.

[260] Bridges and Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, 50.

views. There is often little room for compromise when foundational church practices are in view.

Founding Pastors Are Original Ministry Hubs

One final reason for the uniqueness of the founding pastor is that he is often the only paid staff member, and as a result, he becomes the center-point and only hands-on staff worker in major ministry areas. In some cases, the church may not yet have a session, so he is the de-facto decision maker and chief-strategizer. When it comes to resolving difficulties, he is the major problem-solver. As far as pastoral care is concerned, he is the primary shepherd. When it comes to the equipping ministries of the church, he does the preaching, worship planning, and teaching. So, all of the ministries of the church are attached to and dependent on him in some way and eventually this attachment becomes part of the culture of the church.

This dynamic resembles that of a small business entrepreneur who has to have his hands on everything, something that Hank Bailey, the founding pastor of RPC, described concerning his father's entrepreneurial efforts in chapter four. "There's a lot of small businessmen who only want the business to be as big as they can personally manage."

Cautions about the Ministries of Founding Pastors

Because of the strict financial limitations facing most church plants, such an unhealthy system is a common scenario, and practically speaking, it works well until the church grows beyond the founding pastor's ability to manage all the ministry decisions being made. In seasons like this, the weaknesses in the model begin to show as the

founding pastor may continue to insert himself into decision making processes better left to others, leading to major conflict or a deeper entrenchment of the founding pastor's idiosyncratic ministry approach.

It is at this critically important moment early in the life of the church, when there is such high energy and synergy, and when a founding pastor is planting seeds for long-term sustainability, that he may be, unwittingly, also sowing weeds that will make the inevitable transition away from his leadership difficult.

To be clear, it is the rare church planter and core group who approves of this counterproductive mindset. Far more commonly, they are trying to survive, pouring their blood, sweat and tears into establishing a church which is a source of spiritual encouragement and blessing. But over time, the synergy surrounding their core cultural values can turn overly deferential and morph into an ecclesial fiefdom in which people become reticent to question the venerated founder, which then tends to reinforce the dependence on the founder even more as the church widens its membership base.

That said, those key leaders around a founding pastor are well advised to begin, at the earliest moment possible, to think about the inevitability of transition and to begin to assess how they and their founding pastor can build structures within the ministries of their church which will help it to remain sustainable past the transition that will eventually come to pass.

Inevitably, as Hank Bailey finally realized, he needed to actively and willingly hand over control of many ministries that he had previously managed, a process that often seems foreign to an in-process church plant. "Some sessions have a controlling view of the ministries in the congregation, some pastors have a controlling view...I had

struggled with this myself, but now my view is just the opposite...our real role is servanthood and equipping."

For many founding pastors, reaching this point is very difficult because of what Vanderbloemen and Bird referred to as "Founders Syndrome," a complex leadership mindset that prevents them from being able to differentiate their own best interests from those of their congregation. [261]

Church sessions and lay leaders would do well to orient their founding pastors to the danger of this syndrome early in their ministry tenure and to schedule opportunities for the founding pastor and the church leadership as a whole to debrief their ability to differentiate between their own best interests as pastors and those of the congregation they serve.

Along these lines it may be helpful for church leaders and the founding pastor to frame a loose timeline within a founding pastor's tenure in order to target an ideal season for transition. Understanding that most pastors are not entrenched until about three years have passed and that long term-pastorates commence after about seven years, I would recommend that the ideal transition zone for an entrepreneurial style church planter would be somewhere in the five to seven-year window.[262]

---

[261] This concept was developed by researchers William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird as they researched pastoral succession. However, much of their research was developed in looking at the world of business.

[262] This timeline need not be overly rigid but often it helps to have a goal in mind in order to prompt the kinds of conversations between founding pastors and their leadership teams that are envisioned in this dissertation. Additionally, I might caveat this suggestion for founding pastors who demonstrate strong managerial gifts and who may be able to continue to thrive beyond the initial season of church-planting, though this is not very common.

Principle #3: Plan for Transition Now

Chapter two showed that planning for the day of succession may be "the most important" leadership task a founding pastor and church will ever face.[263] This is because "Succession from first generation leaders to second generation leaders are the least likely to go well. In fact, too often they end up much more like a divorce than a wedding."[264]

In spite of all the painful evidence reinforcing this idea, the sad reality is that many founding pastors and church leadership teams, like their cousins in the business world, do little to nothing to prepare their congregations for transition, let alone the critical moment of the first transition.

> The notion that organizations, independent of their tax status, shouldn't be focused on the development and succession of their leadership, especially at the top, strikes me as patently absurd...there is no reason that institutions in the not-for-profit sector shouldn't be held accountable for the development of the next generation of leadership.[265]

But how can founding pastors and church leaders create space to undertake this important task when their lives are already busy tending to the everyday tasks of managing the church?

---

[263] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 9.

[264] Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 79.

[265] Tichy, *Succession*, 270.

Establish a Succession Planning Task Force

In order to facilitate this planning, the session could appoint a succession planning task force to consider this question as early in the ministry of the founding pastor as is practically possible.

When possible, a ruling elder with the longest history in the church or on the session may be the best choice for leading this task force so as to bridge the church's history and cultural dynamics. Balancing this, it may be advisable to place newer leaders with less experience on this group as well, in order to balance any deferential tendencies and to represent a second-generation leadership perspective. Additional advisory members are recommended, as fellow stakeholders, especially those gifted in change management and respected by many portions of the church community.

So, what exactly would a group like this do?

Prepare for Various Transition Possibilities

Many assume that the first transition a congregation will face will be a run-of-the-mill transition in which the pastor is called elsewhere while the church is thriving. In this circumstance, while there is sadness surrounding the founding pastor's departure and challenges in moving toward a first successor, there is normally plenty of goodwill to smooth the process.

Unfortunately, this type of transition scenario is far less common than is normally thought to be the case. Most pastors are reticent to leave, especially when a church is thriving and if their family is well established in the community. In chapter four, David Evans, the founding pastor at St. John's, reflected on his own reticence to step away from the work even though he was sensing that he may no longer have been the best fit to lead

the church forward. "I might've been too resistant to being called elsewhere for too long."

In reality, the situations faced in all three of the churches in this study contain a critically important clue for first transitions: founding pastors are usually excellent at building churches but weak at maintaining them. In fact, the entrepreneurial tendencies of founding pastors can gradually weary congregations who are ready to settle down once the hard work of establishing the church is done.

Ben Gibbs reflected on the entrepreneurial strengths of SJPC's founding pastor versus their desire for someone who had stronger management and maintenance qualities. As they looked to the future, they needed to move away from the builder and find "a manager...someone who maintains and moves us at a more consistent and steadier pace."

On the flip side, if the founding pastor is forced into maintenance or management mode, it will weary him as he's often most motivated by forward motion in ministry. As Paul Johnson, the first successor pastor at SJPC indicated concerning his predecessor, "David had a thousand ideas and nine-hundred and ninety-eight of them needed to be implemented yesterday. So, he was kind of a hard charger: 'Here's the hill I'm going to take, try to keep up.'"

While not a critique of a founding pastor per se, it seems to me that some types of pastors are best equipped to plant churches, and some are best equipped to sustain them.

Understanding that founding pastors may not easily recognize when the moment to move on may be upon them until conflict has begun or the church begins to decline, it's critical that church leadership teams take the time to consider alternative scenarios for the types of transition they may be required to oversee.

There are two over-arching types of transition: those birthed in crisis and those that are anticipated.

One of the most complicated transitions involves an unforeseen crisis. Several types of unforeseen crisis may arise, the most painful and confusing of which involves the death of the founding pastor as a result of accident or illness.[266] This type of crisis calls for a carefully developed succession plan and requires the leadership to ensure the ongoing management of the church's ministries, the temporary filling of the pulpit with a highly empathetic shepherd, and the comfort of grieving family members, officers, staff, and congregants. In the case of an accident, everything will hit at once, whereas in the case of a serious illness, there may be some warning, though not enough to develop a full-fledged succession plan if it was not already underway. In fact, any plans developed in the midst of crisis are prone to be reactive and may be too deferential to the deceased founding pastor's views or too different from them.

Another unforeseen crisis would involve the moral failure of the founding pastor, or abusive ministry patterns that reach a breaking point. In these scenarios a session must ensure the continuity of the church's ministries and minister to the fallen pastor and his family, as well as bring guidance and hope to the devastated and confused members of the church community. These circumstances are further aggravated when the moral failure includes another member of the congregation or staff as well as the virus-like spread of distrust, anger, and pain within the congregation.

---

[266] I personally experienced this type of crisis when serving on the staff of a church planted by my father law who succumbed to an aggressive form of cancer while the church was thriving.

As with transition plans developed in the midst of grieving a death, transition plans developed in the midst of dealing with moral failure may also be strongly reactive and may become too rigidly focused on legislating a particular sin out of the realm of possibility for the successor pastor, something that our theological convictions remind us is simply not possible.

One additional variety of crisis transition, and one dealt with extensively in chapter four, is burnout. As was the case with Fellowship Church, the founding pastor's burnout was unknown to the session until it became so acute that he could no longer continue in ministry, thus precipitating an extreme crisis that made the maintenance of core ministries even more difficult. As Sam Jackson, a ruling elder at Fellowship Presbyterian Church put it, "If he had come to us, maybe at the beginning of that calendar year, it might not have been so hard."

The other type of burnout is one that builds over time and is recognized by church leaders alongside the pastor. In this case the burnout precipitates a leave of absence or a sabbatical designed to re-charge the batteries of the pastor before a return to the same ministry. However, as observed at Fellowship Church, the leave of absence turned into a sabbatical which then turned into a resignation, a process not uncommon when pastoral burnout is indicated.

In situations involving burnout, church leaders must care for the pastor and their family while also dealing with bewilderment that sometimes presents as anger at either the burned-out pastor, for failing to deal with himself in a healthy manner, or the leaders, for failing to recognize the need to deal with the situation before it reached a point of crisis. Usually, anger will be directed at both.

Another variety of crisis transition involves an unfolding crisis, and one of the most common forms of unfolding crises is connected to relational breakdowns between the founding pastor and other constituencies in the church, normally the session or staff. When relationships break down, as was the case at St. John's, sessions will be called on to develop a succession plan and navigate the complicated case of ending the pastoral relationship while simultaneously guarding the reputations of the founding pastor and those with whom he had conflict. Given the length of time needed and the number of people involved, it is very difficult for any organization to pull this off perfectly, and some relationships between members or church leaders who were once close friends, will be badly damaged or broken.

An even more intense variety of relational breakdown involves situations in which the founding pastor leaves the existing congregation in a moment of conflict in favor of starting a new church in the same area. This is normally referred to as a church split. Though leaders and staff normally see this type of crisis unfolding, when it finally happens, it can be as devastating as the death of the founding pastor though even more emotionally evocative as the anger which often results will be directed at church leaders on one side or the other of the split.

In the PCA safeguards against allowing these types of circumstances do exist, but even the best work of presbyteries cannot possibly address the wide-ranging emotional impacts of a founding pastor who leaves the church he began and starts another church nearby against the wishes of the original church's leadership or congregation.

Perhaps more common, and slightly less painful, is when a founding pastor feels called elsewhere. Usually, church leaders have some advanced notice, but often not as

much as one might hope. The emotions in these types of situations require the comfort of a grieving congregation and the assurance of the continuation of their recently established congregation at the loss of the only pastor they've ever known.

Related to a category mentioned in the first section on crisis is the occurrence of a ministry-threatening illness in the life of the pastor, but which does not result in death. In this scenario recovery is uncertain, which places the leadership of the church in a difficult quandary. They will desire to be patient with the healing process in the life of the pastor but must also ensure the continuation of the ministries of the church, often without the benefit of the finances that would have become available if the founding pastor had resigned or passed away.

Additionally, there may be confusion about who is providing leadership in the pastor's absence and under which circumstances the church will have to make the decision to shift authority away from the founding pastor, who may still hope to return, but who may never be able to perform ministry duties the way he or she once did.

The most docile of founding pastor transitions occurs at the founding pastor's retirement and relocation. Though this transition is not without its own difficulties, existing church leaders are granted the most time to evaluate the culture of their church and how to position itself as it prepares to welcome a first successor pastor.

In these situations, once the retirement timetable has been agreed upon, the founding pastor is often amenable to working to develop a search process and may be willing to assist with some aspects of the recruitment. As far as the congregation goes, there will be grieving at the loss of the founding pastor but normally there will not be anger with the founding pastor. In situations like this, though still challenging, honoring

the founding pastor's legacy can be bittersweet as congregations feel like an era is ending, which often prompts an aching sense of loss or longing for the 'good old days.'

Similar to the retirement scenario but slightly more complex is the situation in which the founding pastor chooses to remain in the congregation as an emeritus pastor. There is a real sense of joy at the prospect for most, but his presence may be a threat to the first successor pastor, who must always be vigilant about honoring the reputation and ministry legacy of the founder in public ways. The key here, according to Shane Adams, a ruling elder at RPC, is that the first successor pastor must demonstrate public respect for the ministry of the founder.

As the church moves forward, the success of implementing new ministry ideas or structures depends on the humility and maturity of the founding pastor, as well as the sensitivity shown by the successor pastor and leaders.

The final variety of anticipated transitions restructure the founding pastor's job description to permit the entry of a new lead pastor and his own re-assignment. This was the situation at Reconciliation Church.

In some of these situations, a person is brought in from the outside to fill the lead pastor role, and in some, like Reconciliation Church, an internal staff member is elevated to the lead pastor role while the founding pastor is shifted into a different role, such as associate pastor for shepherding or missions or pastoral care.

In these situations, the success of the endeavor depends on the maturity levels of all the key leaders but mostly on the founding pastor as he is facing the most change and loss. Bridges and Bridges explained that a deep sense of fear and loss comes into play in the mind of a founder when the idea of transition is broached. "Changes cause transitions,

which cause losses, and it is the losses, not the changes, that they're reacting to...It's a piece of their world that is being lost, not a piece of ours."[267]

It is absolutely essential in these situations that the leaders, staff, founding pastor, and successor pastor are well prepared and in agreement on what can and cannot be changed while the founding pastor remains in church leadership, such as Reconciliation Church's commitment to preserve the equal time breakdown in preaching.

Leaders Must Learn Who They Are

Several writers underlined key factors critical to transition in the business context, and of all the factors discussed, the culture of an organization received the most scrutiny.

> Cultural factors are a major ingredient in the new leader's success...The major players must be prepared to explain the culture clearly and in a practical way to the new leader...the power and influence aspect of the culture is the most important for the new leader to understand.[268]

Unfortunately, leaders of a congregation, according to experts, often overlook or are unaware of their core cultural values due to their immersion in the organizational system. "[These values] are rarely explained to the new leader by the major players because they themselves do not recognize them well enough to articulate a description."[269]

When the time comes to begin succession planning, leaders must first identify their culture, usually expressed in oft-repeated core values. Second, they must ask

---

[267] Bridges and Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, 26-27.

[268] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top*, 106.

[269] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the To*p, 42.

themselves to what degree they are committed to these cultural core values as a leadership group, and third, they must assess the degree to which the congregation understands and embraces the cultural core values that have been identified. The answers to these questions are critical to determining the readiness of the congregation to engage in a healthy initial transition and to the prospects of a first successor pastor. Prospects can then be asked to agree to their core values or undertake a change agenda for the church.

If there is a strong sense of continuity in the answers to these three questions, the prospect of a healthy transition is much higher, as was the case at Reconciliation Church. If there is low continuity between the answers to these three questions, the prospect of a healthy transition is much lower, as was the case at Fellowship Church and to a lesser degree at St. John's Church.

This is not to say that a church cannot make the transition to a new set of cultural core values. But it is to say that the health of the transition, measured externally by the church's ability to maintain its membership and budget through a transition, and internally by the degree of pain absorbed by leaders and congregants during the transition, is most threatened when discontinuity surfaces in the answers to these questions.

To prepare to transition and adapt existing core values to a new leader, Ciampa and Dotlich provide a template of questions that the entire organization and its leadership need to consider before embarking on transition planning.[270] I have adapted their five core questions to account for the context of the local church.

---

[270] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top*, 76–78.

1. A strategic question: How can the first successor pastor best graft his core values onto those already present and do so in such a way that neither he nor the values he holds aren't rejected?

2. An operational question: How can our church best maintain its ministry momentum while implementing processes and systems necessary for the successor pastor to incorporate new ministry approaches within our congregation?

3. A political question: How can our church best assist a first successor pastor in understanding our church's unique political structure while also ensuring they have the freedom to pursue their own approaches to ministry leadership?

4. A personal question: How can the first successor pastor best take control and establish himself with confidence while also pausing to understand the needs and convictions of the session, staff, and congregation he has inherited?

5. A cultural question: How can our church help the first successor pastor understand the church's cultural norms so that he or she can make the culture work toward achieving the goals that he or she was hired to pursue?

Discuss the Ultimate Goal for the Culmination of the Founding Pastor's Tenure

When faced with the end of the founding pastor's tenure, that pastor and the leadership team need to have a forthright conversation about what happens when that founding pastor is no longer the lead pastor of the church.

Back in chapter four, the founding pastor of Reconciliation Church, Hank Bailey, had a deep desire to remain in the church, and because of this he self-engineered a plan that would affect his desired result, including the formation of his own job description.

> So, I was very blunt and very honest. I told Mark first, and then I addressed the session. I said 'I feel like I have a lot of work still to do at RPC. I'm not going anywhere. So, I would like to see Mark transition to the senior pastor position, and I would then have the freedom to work in some of these other areas of ministry that we have developed as a church.'

On the whole, the transition at Reconciliation Church was healthy, but the session and the successor pastor felt some aspects could have been better, most significantly in areas related to the church's organizational management chart and the corresponding job descriptions of both the founding pastor and the first successor pastor.

So, in cases where the founding pastor expresses interest in the possibility of remaining a part of the congregation or staff after transitioning out of the lead pastor role, it is incumbent on the church leaders, working in concert with the existing founding pastor, to determine if they believe their church is strong enough and the founding pastor is humble enough to sort through the emotions that will occur with shifts in responsibility and authority.

This process is critical because of the tendency for founders to resist moving out, even when the church may have passed its peak or become exhausted by the entrepreneurial mindset of the founder. It is in this conversation between the founding pastor and the existing church leadership that the greatest peril exists due to the profound spiritual, emotional, familial and even physical investment that the founding pastor has made, often over a lengthy period of time.

Some of the peril can be reduced if this conversation is had early on, within the first two to three years of a church's existence. If done then, it may even help founding pastors understand their own skill sets and free them to be more discerning about their larger role in the kingdom of God. In some cases, some founding pastors may realize that they are uniquely gifted to be an initiator of new churches and then move on to begin again.

In cases in which both the existing church leadership and the founding pastor believe that the potential for a healthy transition exists, then the founding pastor could join the voting members of the succession planning task force to address organizational management, reporting relationships, and job descriptions, and then how the succession process will unfold and a future role once the transition is complete.

If the founding pastor is uncertain regarding long-term plans, or when the leadership is opposing the idea of a continuing ministry for the founding pastor, they should consider limiting the founding pastor's involvement to an advisory role in the process, without a vote. In this capacity the founding pastor can still speak into certain issues and provide the task force with critical cultural insights to better understand the nuances of their church's personality, while not dictating the overall plan. This advisory role also allows for shifts in calling and position as the process unfolds.

The same advisory role would be wise if the founding pastor is young and years away from transition or if he is certain that he does not desire a long-term ministry at the church since no one can rule out having to undergo an unplanned transition at some later point.

In cases where significant conflict may already be present, the leadership should be circumspect with the establishment of this task force. I do not recommend hiding the existence of such a group from a founding pastor, so if the leadership's relationship with a founding pastor is so broken that establishing such a task force is liable to push emotions over the edge, it may be wisest to delay doing so and devote the leadership team's main efforts to healing the broken relationship until such time as a decision is made regarding the founding pastor's future. Even so, whatever type of transition may be unfolding, it will always be healthier if the founding pastor can cooperate with the church's existing leadership in making plans for the future with a basic sense of unity.

Once the framework for managing the succession is in place, the leadership should notify the congregation of the existence of the succession plan, in general terms, and continue to mention the presence of a succession plan at its annual meetings. Additionally, it would be wise for the succession task force to hold annual meetings to update or re-affirm the plan that has been developed.

Determine an Inside or Outside Approach

Whether or not to consider an internal candidate depends on the specific context of the congregation and the type of transition in view. Experts in business transition are not in agreement about whether internal or external candidates are preferred, with some indicating an "ongoing preference as a board is to find an internal successor to the CEO

in order to maintain our strategic heading and preserve our culture" and others believing

that the right person to succeed is often "the one who has been prepared elsewhere." [271, 272]

Statistically, some evidence suggests that, at least in the world of business,

internal successors have a slightly higher retention rate than external ones.[273] This

continuity is anecdotally confirmed by the two stories of biblical succession regarding

Moses and Samuel in this study. In the case of Moses to Joshua, a successful transition, it

was internal. In the case of Samuel to Saul, an unsuccessful transition, it was external.

The reasons for the slightly higher success rate of internal successors may have

something to do with the pre-existing health of the organizational systems in which they

reside. When organizations are unhealthy or experiencing difficulty, its common to look

outside the existing talent pool for a new leader that can bring a change agenda, whereas,

when organizations are healthy and experiencing success in ministry, it breeds a desire to

continue the existing direction of the organization. Internal candidates who understand

the factors that contribute to the organization's success are often deemed more likely to

continue the core cultural practices that most in the organization embrace.

Now, it goes without saying that churches are not businesses, and the success a

church experiences is defined and determined ultimately by the Lord. However, churches

are living organisms, and in that regard, they do share some similarities with business

---

271 Saporito and Winum, *Inside CEO Succession*, 78.

272 Vanderbloemen, Bird, and Ortberg, *Next*, 24.

273 Ciampa and Watkins, *Right From The Start*, 3.

systems in the formation of complex relational processes to order the dynamics that exist in their cultural environment.[274]

In cases where an unplanned transition is in view or one in which most leaders agree that the church has been struggling or stagnant, there are greater complexities in elevating an internal candidate due to fears about replicating unhealthy practices. In these cases, going outside the system may produce the best results.

In cases where an anticipated transition is in view, there are many good reasons to consider an internal candidate, a process permitted by many denominations within certain guidelines, especially if the general trajectory of the church has been good and the congregation has a positive view of how the church is functioning.[275] This choice is especially true when the founding pastor is willing to be invested in the process of mentoring and equipping that candidate to take on the role of first successor, whether or not he, the founding pastor, intends to remain. If he does plan to remain, it is essential that there is a high degree of trust in place between him and the potential successor such as that witnessed at Reconciliation Church.

---

[274] Herrington, Creech, and Taylor, *The Leader's Journey*, 29.

[275] BCO 23-1: The associate or assistant pastors may continue to serve a congregation when the pastoral relation of the senior pastor is dissolved, but they may not normally succeed the senior pastor without an intervening term of service in a different field of labor. However, a congregation by a secret ballot with four-fifths (4/5) majority vote may petition Presbytery for an exception which by a three-fourths (3/4) majority vote Presbytery may grant. Presbytery needs to determine if the dissolution of the pastoral relationship with the senior pastor was brought about in Christian love and good order on the part of the parties concerned.

Recommend the Search Entity

In my opinion, if there is ever a time to invoke the clause in our Book of Church Order to permit the session to be elected by the congregation as the pulpit search committee, it is at the transition from the founding pastor to the first successor pastor.[274,276] This exception is recommended because of the disturbing statistics on initial transition in the world of business and the stepfamily, statistics that I anecdotally confirmed within the church in preparation for this study.[277, 278, 279] This is not to say that congregations cannot be trusted with managing transitions, but rather, because the work required to equip them at such a critically important crossroads is time consuming and, as this study argues, demands a deep awareness of the complex relational and cultural systems in play in even a small congregation.

If it is the intention of the leaders to request that the session be elected as the pulpit search committee at the time of initial succession, this decision should be presented to the congregation when the succession plan is first described, along with the particular reasons why they believe this route to be in the best interest of the congregation and the individual who will eventually serve as the first successor pastor. When making such a request, leaders should allot a fair amount of time for dialogue and should expect a

---

[276] BCO 20-2: A church shall proceed to elect a pastor in the following manner: The Session shall call a congregational meeting to elect a pulpit committee which may be composed of members from the congregation at large or the Session, as designated by the congregation (see *BCO* 25).

[277] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top*, 5.

[278] Waltz, *Blended*, xiii.

[279] Our anecdotal suspicions that the statistics related to transition in the church were almost just as bad were confirmed when after having initial contact with approximately 30 churches in preparation for this study, only a very small handful could truly have been said to have had a highly successful initial transition.

number of reasonable and important questions, many of which may be resistant to the proposal.

If a congregation will not agree to elect the current leadership to serve as the search committee, then great care must be taken by the leaders and the church's succession planning task force to equip those elected for the work of searching for a new pastor, which is complicated enough, and for coming to grips with the complex strategic, operational, political, cultural, and personal factors that must be grasped to facilitate a healthy search process and a healthy long term transition outcome.

Communicate General Succession Concepts

Once the succession plan has been agreed to by the session and, if appropriate, the founding pastor, the general concepts contained within the plan can be given to the congregation at an annual meeting and then revisited at subsequent annual meetings of the congregation in order to keep the plan fresh in the minds of all the stakeholders.

Create Symbolic Transition Markers

If and when an internal candidate has emerged, consider a ceremony marking the event within the context of a worship service or annual meeting of the congregation at which time the candidate is commissioned to the work of pastor-in-waiting. While this is not an ordination or installation ceremony in any formal sense it is an important symbolic moment in the life of a congregation that buttresses the credibility of both the process that is being entered into and the particular person who will become the first successor pastor.

Principle #4: Recalibrate Your Ministry Culture and Core Values for Smoother Transition

Once the succession planning task force and the leaders have debriefed their findings, it's essential that they recalibrate any deficiencies in their current ministry culture to make the inevitable transition work more smoothly. Hank Bailey, the founding pastor of Reconciliation Church, realized that he had tendencies toward over-centralizing ministries around his leadership. As a result, he set out to make sure that he rebuilt the ministry platforms of Reconciliation Church to withstand the forces of transition and to give his eventual successor "huge amounts of leadership responsibility and opportunity."

In my opinion, among all the core ministry practices discussed above, the pulpit ministry has the greatest impact on transition, because, whether intentional or not, the way a founding pastor manages the pulpit ministry will heavily impact his successor. If the founding pastor dominates the pulpit ministry in the number of weeks he is active in the pulpit and in his rare grants of access to the pulpit by others on his staff, there will likely be several unintended side effects.

First, pulpit domination by a gifted preacher will likely enable the newly planted church to grow rapidly. If the founding pastor regularly produces biblically grounded, intellectually stimulating, personally applicable, and evangelistically effective sermons in a personable way, people will come, and visitors will be rarely disappointed and thus be more likely to attend and eventually join the congregation.

Secondly, the frequency of the founding pastor's presence in the pulpit will cause the people in the church, including the leadership, to develop an idiosyncratic view of what good preaching is. Good preaching will be directly equated with the way the founding pastor preaches because the congregation rarely experiences anything else.

Third, on the rare occasion when another less experienced member of the staff preaches, he will be judged against the narrow standard of preaching excellence defined by the founding pastor. Such narrow standards have the knock-on effect of stunting the preaching development of the other pastors on staff by forcing them into a particular preaching mold that delays or hinders the development of their own preaching personality.

Finally, as it relates to the church's ability to transition to a successor pastor, the implications of pulpit domination by a founding pastor creates an unattainable ideal for the successor pastor, who may neither preach as often nor in a similar style as his predecessor. As a result, in spite of what might be perceived as the biblical faithfulness of the founding pastor, by dominating the pulpit he may be creating an avoidable transition difficulty.

At Reconciliation Church, Hank and the session counteracted this dilemma by reorienting the traditional understanding of an effective pulpit ministry. Instead of emphasizing the preaching ministry of the lead pastor, Hank decided, and the session agreed, that the pulpit would be shared equally between himself and the associate pastor who was, stylistically speaking, very different from him. When the transition was eventually affected, the congregation experienced almost no difference in the Sunday morning worship experience as both men continued to preach half of the time. Making this decision early in the life of Reconciliation Church and embedding it into the culture and core values of the church created a more favorable transition dynamic.

Each congregation would do well to determine whether its ministry core values are unintentionally creating unhealthy transition pathways. If this may be the case, the

leadership of the church, working in concert with the founding pastor, can then determine their own strategies for adjusting these core values well in advance of entering into the season of initial transition.

Principle #5: Transition Isn't Over when the New Pastor Is Installed

One of the most overlooked factors in a healthy transition is the development and maintenance of a robust onboarding process for a new pastor and especially a first successor pastor. Ciampa and Dotlich noted, "Ensuring the early productivity of new senior executives, or more importantly, ways to avoid their failure, has largely been ignored."[280] This oversight comes home to roost once the new successor pastor has been installed, and the church thinks the transition work is done. This could not be further from the truth.

The installation of the first successor pastor is, at best, the middle of the process, similar to the progression observed in stepfamilies back in chapter two: "For a stepfamily, a wedding is not the beginning, it's the middle. Stepfamilies are born out of the loss of previous family relationships."[281]

Establish an Onboarding Process for the Successor Pastor

For this reason, I recommend a subcommittee of the succession task force also serve as the onboarding committee. This onboarding committee would have intimate

---

[280] Ciampa and Dotlich, *Transitions at the Top*, 113.

[281] Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 227.

knowledge of the issues surrounding the transition and would be equipped to steer the process of integrating the successor pastor into the life and culture of the church. This process does not become well established until the third year after the transition has occurred and may necessitate the activity of the committees covered below for a similar period of time. The onboarding committee has two critical job components.

The Cultural Education of the Successor Pastor

        The cultural factor is the most complex factor in transition because it is rarely written down and codified in the same ways as an organizational management model may be. A succession planning task force will have become conversant in its cultural dynamics in the development and maintenance of their succession plan and as a result must act as close advisors to the first successor pastor as he seeks to understand the ministry culture of the church. If they have done their work well prior to the search process and have provided the pulpit search team with the proper insights regarding the cultural dynamics that must shape the search, then their ongoing work in onboarding the successor pastor will be less intense.

System Maintenance Around the Successor Pastor

        Transitions take place at the critical hinges of an organization and involve multiple parties. Even in cases in which the first successor pastor is well aware of the cultural dynamics, he will regularly encounter congregants, volunteers, and even staff members who may not have been as well prepared as he was to navigate the swirling waters of transition. In this regard the second critical task of the onboarding committee is to act as a jetty in calming choppy waters around the successor pastor during the critical

early days of a first pastoral transition by regularly engaging with staff and key volunteers during the first three years of a first transition process.

Establish an Offboarding Process for the Founding Pastor

Simultaneous to the onboarding process for the successor pastor, there must be an offboarding process for the founding pastor if he desires to continue to be a part of the congregation as an emeritus pastor or in another staff role. I would propose that a second subcommittee of the succession task force assume the role of the offboarding committee. This offboarding committee would support two important missions.

Create a Safe Place for the Reassigned Founding Pastor to Express his Personal Views

When a founding pastor is reflecting on the church he helped to start, especially when one of the core ministry values he put in place begins to change, that pastor will want to express his opinions safely. For instance, using the earlier analogy about music, if the first successor pastor wants to shift the church from ensemble led worship to choir-led worship, the founding pastor may view this change as an existential threat to the church's flourishing. And indeed, making a change this drastic may be a poor decision that should be revisited. When founding pastors remain in the church after vacating the central leadership role, they need a place to express their opinions with a group of people who have been prepared to interact with these opinions in a healthy way and to provide feedback that may assist the emeritus or reassigned founding pastor in navigating the complex emotions surrounding loss that he may be experiencing in the forfeiture of his central leadership role. The offboarding committee provides an ideal sounding board for

the founding pastor to process his concerns without threatening the authority of the first successor pastor.

In situations in which a founding pastor is expressing an opinion, positive or negative, and which may merit dialogue with the first successor pastor, this offboarding committee could discuss the matter with the onboarding committee to determine how or even if it would be wise to directly carry the issue to the successor pastor or other leaders and if so, who should do so, the offboarding committee or the founding pastor himself.

Develop a Helpful Symbolic Witness Toward the Changing Role of the Founding Pastor

People benefit from ceremonies to assist them in marking critical moments of change. To this end a public ceremony with appropriate symbolism can be very helpful toward turning the page to new leadership. Like the companion ceremony mentioned earlier for successor pastors-in-waiting, a ceremony marking the change from lead pastor to some other role can be quite helpful for both the founding pastor, his family, the existing leadership of the church and the whole congregation in turning their faces toward the future.[282]

Principle #6: Engage the Inevitable Loss in Transition

David Evans, the founding pastor at St. John's Presbyterian Church astutely observed, "You know, there's just a lot of loss in transition, and someone is going to have

---

[282] This ceremony should be more than just a going away party. Some kind of a tangible symbol of transition, even one that is light-hearted like photographing the two men together at the changing of the name plate on the pastor's office door or parking place could be a helpful visual for the congregation.

to absorb it, and if folks aren't willing to really process it in a healthy way, someone is going to have absorb the unhealthy remnants of it."

Churches can survive and even thrive after difficult and painful transitions, as was seen in chapter four, because the Lord Jesus is the head of the church. While celebrating this fact, I want to be clear that although the church can survive, there is often collateral damage to the various individuals involved in a painful transition which is neither pleasing to the Lord nor preferred to a transition in which the pain and loss can be kept to an absolute minimum.

One helpful area of corollary research into avoiding this collateral damage is the institution of a stepfamily.[283] As cited in chapter two and earlier in this chapter, one observer of stepfamily dynamics made this perceptive observation which I think applies well to churches in an initial transition:

> For a stepfamily, a wedding is not the beginning, it's the middle.
> Stepfamilies are born out of the loss of previous family relationships;
> that is, they are created when a marriage follows death, divorce or an out
> of wedlock birth. This loss creates a paradox of emotions for the new
> stepfamily: hand in hand with joy and hope linger sadness and grief.[284]

The most complex difficulty faced in a stepfamily versus a biological family context is, as Friedman explained in chapter two, that "What is beneficial to one condition can be harmful to the other."[285]

---

[283] For the purposes of this study, we are setting aside the question of whether or not the marriage ended in a biblical or unbiblical way and focusing instead on the relational fallout related to the end of the marriage.

[284] Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 227.

[285] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 105.

When the pastor being installed is the first pastor a church has ever had, it is much like a first wedding ceremony. Family and friends gather, vows are taken, commitments are made, a feast is had, the pastor-congregation "marriage" is effectuated, and the future looks bright as the pastor and congregation begin a journey together. New members, like new children, gradually are added to the number and powerful spiritual and relational experiences lock them all together.

Inevitably, a time comes when the "marriage" between the founding pastor and the church comes to an end. In some cases, like retirement, the end to the ecclesial marriage comes slowly, whereas in other cases, like a painful relational breakdown, the end comes about in a tragic and unexpected way and what is left behind when the original pastor departs are bereaved church leaders and congregants.

By God's grace, another ecclesial marriage eventually forms, and a new pastor is "wed" to the existing group of leaders who then are, together, called to shepherd the congregation. This moment is much like a second marriage ceremony, but this marriage isn't the same as the first because it's not a beginning; it's a continuation under new leadership. As Ron Deal explained, this marriage is "the middle" in that it "creates a paradox of emotions for the new stepfamily: "hand in hand with joy and hope linger sadness and grief."

Human beings don't forget about the profound experiences they had with the founding pastor. And many of these memories are connected to feelings of loss. "Part of every stepfamily member's memories and even his or her heart is often in another home.

The words stepfather, stepmother, and stepchild exist in Old English forms related to the word *astieped*, meaning, 'bereaved.'"[286]

As a result, an inevitable and unavoidable process of comparison comes into play, especially from the perspective of the members of the church, who must encounter the new pastor within the same ministerial framework as the first, namely, through his preaching, his shepherding, his leadership and his equipping ministries.

Because of this, congregational leaders must remain vigilant about expressions of loss in all the constituencies involved in initial pastoral transitions.

Engaging Loss Among Congregants

Like children in a stepfamily, some members of a congregation are able to differentiate between the roles that the founder and the first successor play, while others have great difficulty and experience a sense of pain and loss. As Deal put it, "No one in a stepfamily experiences more loss than children."[287] So, "If you are a parent, you need to understand the impact that loss has on your children. If you are a stepparent, you need to empathize with--not resent--your stepchildren's grief."[288]

One of the most important ways this can be done is in recognizing that the criticisms often leveled at the successor pastor or the leadership team around him are

---

[286] Waltz, *Blended*. Xi.

[287] Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 238.

[288] Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*, 239.

actually expressions of grief tied closely to the loss of stability and spiritual provision achieved under the tenure of the founding pastor.

Practically speaking, this can be addressed by successor pastors and church leaders in talking about and providing resources on grieving for a congregation and by celebrating the legacy of the founding pastor at appropriate moments during and after the transition itself.

Departing founding pastors can also contribute to the health of a transition by urging members to honor and respect the giftedness of the successor pastor. In cases where the founding pastor has left the area, a post-tenure congregational letter, urging patience with the process and support of the successor could be very helpful.

One error that a departing founding pastor can make is attempting to continue a direct pastoral ministry to members of his former congregation. In brief, when a former pastor remains as the primary shepherd to members of his former congregation he is, perhaps unwittingly, stunting the formation of pastoral bonds between the people he is engaging and their new pastor.

In light of this, though it may seem harsh, it would be wise for departing founding pastors to consider naming this issue as they depart and to underline their intention not to have pastoral contact with their former congregants concerning issues germane to the ongoing ministry of the church they are leaving behind nor to accept invitations to

perform funerals, do baptisms, or perform weddings not scheduled before their departure, as these are the intimate ceremonies around which deep pastoral bonds are forged.[289]

Engaging Loss in the Lives of Leaders and Staff

Continuing with the step-family analogy, the leaders and staff of the church are like the remaining biological parent who faces genuine fears about protecting the congregation from any poor pastoral practices by the successor pastor, ensuring the ongoing financial stability of the church in the midst of change, making sure the new pastor is appropriately pastoral with vulnerable people, integrating their lives and ministry ideals together, and all this while at the same time trying to build their own emotional bond to the new pastor.[290]

Departing founding pastors need to exhort their former colleagues to invest themselves in the life of the successor pastor and to do so understanding the complex cultural and relational dynamics that are in flux. Once they have done this, they should underline to their colleagues that they will be taking a lengthy sabbatical from engagement on any conversations about the performance of the successor pastor, save those with the aforementioned offboarding committee, a period of time that I believe should last at least three years.

---

[289] This counsel should not be construed as forbidding friendly communication but rather, an intentional avoidance of ceremonial involvement or giving advice about concerns people may be expressing about the current state of affairs at the church.

[290] Deal, *The Smart Stepfamily*. My summary of Deal's longer section on challenges faced by the remaining biological parent in a stepfamily.

For their part, first successor pastors may wish to establish opportunities for direct

dialogue with their successor in which they can be exploring the nuances of how the

founder encouraged, loved, and supported the other leaders. As a general rule, founding

pastors want the church they were a part of establishing to thrive, even if their departure

was difficult, and would, in most cases, be open to this type of peer dialogue with their

successor. That said, a departing founding pastor should strictly avoid denigrating leaders

when presented with scenarios in which this may be tempting.

Engaging Loss in the Life of the First Successor Pastor

The next relational dynamic to pay attention to is the successor pastor who is like

a new stepparent. Moseley and Moseley pointed out the complex job of a stepparent:

> The stepparent who is committed to the job (of becoming deeply
> connected with stepchildren) is, in fact, left with a major dilemma:
> Accept the status quo--which means accepting second place, accepting a
> marriage where the mate is more bonded to the child--and deal with all
> the consequences of that; or speak up and drag the mate (who is likely to
> be resistant) more genuinely into the marriage and attend to the work of
> strengthening the spousal bond. That means challenging a deeply
> entrenched system and risking the many powerful feelings that will
> inevitably arise until a new equilibrium is established--the equilibrium of
> two equal parents present with a child.[291]

When the founding pastor leaves the church on positive terms, that first bond is

going to remain as a powerful legacy for some time. When the founding pastor leaves the

church on negative terms, like the situation of a divorce in marriage, the first bond is

---

[291] Moseley and Moseley, *Making Your Second Marriage a First-Class Success*, 127.

going to be a deeply complex mix of anger, love, and confusion as was the case with Fellowship Church where the pastor burned out and left without a sense of closure.

In cases like this the successor pastor must account for the legacy of the founder while also going to work on the circumstances that led to the breakdown, which may involve challenging the culture, a process that is sure to produce some degree of difficulty, but which has to take place to gain the "new equilibrium" mentioned above.

When founding pastors exit the church under positive conditions, they can assist the successor pastor by publicly registering their approval of processes that may lead to change in some ministry practices that they were responsible for establishing.

When founding pastors exit the church under negative conditions, they should remember that it wasn't the successor pastor who caused the problems that led to their exit and do everything in their power to not interfere with the difficult work that the first successor pastor is doing in attempting to bring healing in the congregation. They should do this not just because it will help the church to heal but also because the sheep of that congregation do not and have never belonged to them, they are the sheep of the great shepherd, Jesus Christ. The departing founding pastor at Fellowship Church, Gary Matthews, was celebrated by the first successor pastor, Barry Carter, when he said, "Gary showed a lot of humility. He did not leave scorched earth. He didn't do underhanded things that a lot of pastors do when they leave. He just did it well. He left with kindness and humility. He didn't blow anything up or set fire to things."

Sessions especially are charged with supporting and defending the labors of first successor pastors by lovingly but firmly interceding to limit occasions in which critical comparisons of the founder and the successor become commonplace. In most cases this

can be done subtly, but in extreme cases sessions should not be timid about directly challenging critics.

Engaging Loss in the Life of a Founding Pastor

The final dynamic to consider is that surrounding the founding pastor, who shares much in common with the first spouse or offsite biological parent in a stepfamily situation. In cases in which the founding pastor has passed away, those who were a part of founding the ministry will continue to experience it through memories of time spent building the church together.

In cases in which founding pastors are still living but serving in another ministry context, they will be like an original biological parent who has relocated to a different area but who is still reachable and often still consulted by members of the family, even though they have a new step-parent in the home.

In cases in which the founding pastor remains in the church in a different staff role or as an emeritus it is like a biological parent who still lives in the neighborhood and who has an active presence in the life of his biological children.

In all these circumstances, successor pastors, congregations, and sessions need to realize that the founding pastor is experiencing loss as well. Some loss might be experienced as grief over feelings of failure or abandonment if the relationship ended poorly. In other cases, it might involve loss of influence in the lives of church leaders or members who are now being influenced by the successor pastor. In still other ways loss might be related to the end of pet ministries which were but are now no longer effective.

In cases such as this, it is often difficult to differentiate loss from the feeling that the first successor pastor is making a terrible mistake that could lead to the ruin of the church.

First successor pastors, like a new stepmom or stepdad, should be careful not to cast themselves in the same role as their predecessor. This would be like Joshua saying that he was the same as Moses. Instead, they should emphasize honorable things about the founding pastor's legacy and remain focused on the ways that they can build on that legacy and not detract from it. One way they can do this, as with Paul Johnson at St. John's, is by writing a personal note to the founding pastor underlining all the ways that they see the beauty of their predecessor's legacy in the church they are now leading.

Sessions should also work to communicate a continuing sense of gratefulness to the founding pastor for his unique work, especially in situations in which there was a relational breakdown that caused brokenness. Barry Carter felt compelled to defend the positive aspects of the departing founding pastors ministry after he had burned out and caused pain among the congregation. "So, I would refuse to let people bad-mouth him or try to compare us...even though they had been operating in the chaos for so long."

The leadership can initiate meaningful healing by moving beyond the things that caused the pain and focusing instead on what left a positive legacy. Such healing can be done through a letter or even by naming something after the founding pastor. Doing this may go a long way in bringing closure to a past wound and may even invite the founding pastor to take a more positive approach to supporting his successor.

Principle #7: Even in Difficult Initial Transitions Hope Remains

While the process of transition involves pain and loss, the churches in this study all reported genuine progress on the other side of the first transition. Various respondents in two of the churches all experienced significant loss, most of which was relational.

The founding pastors who left their role each found a new place of ministry. In one case it was in a career outside of direct pastoral ministry; in a second, in a part time ministry situation; and in the third, inside the congregation he had helped to found. In each of these scenarios, even though there was pain and loss, the founding pastors had found a new way or place in which to use their gifts.

Ruling elders in the three churches, while noting areas where they could have performed better, all believe that the successor pastor now in place is right for the job and that the lessons they learned in the process of transition have all been helpful in strengthening their bonds.

Each of the successor pastors interviewed believe that they are in the right place and are using their gifts in their churches while honoring the legacy of the founder.

In spite of the losses attendant in each of these transitions, genuine restoration and growth occurred through the process, echoing the promise of God that "all things work together for the good for those that love God and are called according to his purpose" and now, in all three cases, the churches are thriving.

Recommendations for Practice

Church leaders and founding pastors who have never had conversations about the initial pastoral transition and who may not yet be ready to engage in succession planning

can begin their journey by first, independently answering the appropriate question set below and then, dialoging together on the answers given. Doing so may underline key areas of agreement or key areas of discrepancy that may better prepare them to do the important work of succession planning elucidated in the principles covered above.

Questions for Church Leaders

1. How would we define our church's culture?

2. What are our church's core values?

3. How strongly are our church's core values and its culture tied to the ministry style and convictions of our founding pastor?

4. What is our founding pastor's approach to the four major ministry categories of: preaching, shepherding, leadership and equipping?

5. Are there ways in which we have become overly deferential to the ministry culture established by our founding pastor?

6. What would happen to our church if our founding pastor disappeared from his position tomorrow?

7. What is the likelihood that our founding pastor is within fifteen years of transitioning out of his role as lead pastor?

8. In an ideal scenario, could we see our founding pastor remaining in this congregation after his term as lead pastor has ended?

Questions for Founding Pastors

1. How would I define this church's culture?

2. What are the core values of this congregation?

3. How strongly are our church's core values and culture tied to my personal ministry style and convictions?

4. What is my approach to the four major ministry categories of: preaching, shepherding, leadership and equipping?

5. Are there ways in which this congregation may have become overly dependent on me as the founding pastor in any of these areas?

6. What would happen to this church if I disappeared from this position tomorrow?

7. What is the likelihood that I am within fifteen years of transitioning out of my role as lead pastor?

8. In an ideal scenario, could I see myself remaining in this congregation after my term as lead pastor has ended?

Key Components for the Work of Succession Planning Task Forces

1. Determine Pastoral Readiness for Transition

2. Determine Congregational Readiness for Transition

3. Research Congregational Culture and Ministry Approaches

4. Develop a Concise Summary of Congregational Culture and Ministry Approaches

5. Craft an Approach to Succession

6. Present Plan to Session for Feedback and Eventual Approval

7. Present Plan to Congregation

8. Advise Pastoral Search Committee

9. Cultivate an Onboarding Committee for First Successor Pastor

10. Cultivate an Offboarding Committee for Departing Founding Pastor

Recommendations for Further Research

1. Transition Factors in Non-Presbyterian Traditions

2. Unique Dynamics in Crisis Transitions

3. Best Practices for Retaining Founding Pastors on Staff

4. Ministry Dynamics and First Transitions

    a. The Critical Role of Pulpit Management for Transition

    b. The Critical Role of Shepherding for Transition

    c. The Critical Role of Leadership for Transition

    d. The Critical Role of Equipping for Transition

5. The Impact of Transition on the Families of Founding Pastors

6. How to Build Transition Plans into a Church Plant from the Very Start

7. Navigating the Complex Conversation about Transition with a Founding
    Pastor

8. Should Founding Pastors Attempt to Stay for the Long Term?

9. Distinguishing between Theological Convictions and Ministry Culture

10. Discerning the Readiness of Internal Candidates for Ministry Transition

Bibliography

Aronoff, C., S. McClure, and J. Ward. *Family Business Succession: The Final Test of Greatness*. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Baldwin, Joyce G. *1 and 2 Samuel*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008.

Brady, Gary. "A Long Term Pastorate – Pitfalls and Positives." Banner of Truth USA, November 15, 2013. https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2013/long-term-pastorate-pitfalls-positives/.

Bratcher, Ed, Robert Kemper, and Douglas Scott. *Mastering Transitions*. Portland, OR: Multnomah Books, 1991.

Bridges, William, and Susan Bridges. *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*. 3rd ed. Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2009.

Ciampa, Dan, and David L. Dotlich. *Transitions at the Top: What Organizations Must Do to Make Sure New Leaders Succeed*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2015.

Ciampa, Dan, and Michael Watkins. *Right From The Start: Taking Charge In A New Leadership Role*. Boston, MA.: Harvard Business Review Press, 2005.

Cole, R. Alan. *Exodus*. Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 1981.

Deal, Ron L. *The Smart Stepdad: Steps to Help You Succeed*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2011.

Deal, Ron L., *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family*. Rev. ed. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2014.

Dever, Mark. *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. 3rd ed. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013.

———. "Prescription for a Healthy Church." Ministry Today Magazine. Accessed October 14, 2016. http://ministrytodaymag.com/index.php/ministry-today-archives/66-unorganized/831-prescription-for-a-healthy-church.

———. "About 9Marks." 9Marks. Accessed October 14, 2016. https://9marks.org/about/.

Donald MacNair, and Esther Meek. *The Practices of a Healthy Church: Biblical Strategies for Vibrant Church Life and Ministry*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1999.

Durham, John I. *Exodus.* Word Biblical Commentary. Waco, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1987.

Edmondson, Amy C. *Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012.

Evans, Mary J. *The Message of Samuel: Personalities, Potential, Politics and Power*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004.

Firth, David G. *1 & 2 Samuel*. Nottingham, England: IVP Academic, 2009.

Fletcher, David. "Exit of a Founding Pastor." *XPastor®* (blog). Accessed September 29, 2016. https://www.xpastor.org/strategy/10-year-planning/exit-of-a-founding-pastor-jeff-jones-slated-to-replace-gene-getz/.

Friedman, Edwin H. *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*. New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2007.

Gilpin, Lawrence A. "When the Long-Term Pastor Leaves: The Local Church Process of Pastoral Transition in the Presbyterian Church in America," DMin., Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, MO: 2006.

Herrington, Jim, Robert Creech, and Trisha L. Taylor. *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

Keller, Timothy. *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012.

Kennison, Michael. "Making a Move: Exploring Factors That Contribute to a Successful Pastoral Transition," DMin., Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, MO: 2012.

Maffucci, Marc Anthony. "The Process and Pitfalls of Pastoral Transition: A Study of the Pastoral Transitions within the North American Baptist Conference," DMin., Western Seminary, Portland, OR: 1999.

Marsolini, Maxine. *Blended Families: Creating Harmony as You Build a New Home Life*. New ed. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2000.

Merriam, Sharan B. *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. 3rd ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009.

Michael Kruse. "Church as a Family Business." Blog. Kruse Kronicle. Accessed August 10, 2016. http://www.krusekronicle.com/kruse_kronicle/2009/01/church-as-a-family-business.html.

Moon, Ruth. "Quitting Time: The Pope Retired. Should Your Pastor?" ChristianityToday.com. Accessed March 9, 2018. http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/april/quitting-time.html.

Moseley, Doug, and Naomi Moseley. *Making Your Second Marriage a First-Class Success*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1998.

Motyer, J. A. *The Message of Exodus: The Days of Our Pilgrimage*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005.

Ott, Craig, and Gene Wilson. *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011.

Parrott, Les and Leslie. *Saving Your Second Marriage Before It Starts: Nine Questions to Ask Before (and After) You Remarry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009.

Peterson, Eugene H. *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992.

Pope, Randy, and John Maxwell. *The Intentional Church: Moving From Church Success to Community Transformation*. Rev. ed. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2006.

Rainer, Art. "8 Practices That Effective Ministry Leaders Follow." Art Rainer blog. December 3, 2014. http://www.artrainer.com/8-practices-that-effective-ministry-leaders-follow/.

Rainer, Thom. "Ten Traits of Pastors Who Have Healthy Long-Term Tenure." ThomRainer.com. September 29, 2014. https://thomrainer.com/2014/09/ten-traits-pastors-healthy-long-term-tenure/.

Redeemer Presbyterian Church. "Redeemer City to City." Redeemer City to City. Accessed June 6, 2018. https://www.redeemercitytocity.com/about/.

Reed, Eric. "Leadership Surveys Church Conflict." *Christianity Today*, Fall 2004. http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2004/fall/6.25.html.

Saporito, Thomas J., and Paul Winum. *Inside CEO Succession: The Essential Guide to Leadership Transition*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2012.

Schnase, Robert. *Transitions: Leading Churches through Change*. Edited by David N. Mosser. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

Schroff, Amita. "Living With a Stepparent." WebMD. June 22, 2020. https://teens.webmd.com/living-with-step-parent.

The Presbyterian Church in America. *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms As Adopted By the Presbyterian Church in America with Proofs Texts*. 6th ed. Lawrenceville, GA.: Christian Education & Publications, 2018.

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

———. *The Leadership Engine*. New York: HarperBusiness, 2002.

Vanderbloemen, William, Warren Bird. *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 205.

Waltz, Samantha, ed. *Blended: Writers on the Stepfamily Experience*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2015.

Trueman, Carl, R. "Why Do We Draw the Line?" *Tabletalk Magazine*, (July 2012): https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/why-do-we-draw-the-line/.

Woolfe, Lorin. *The Bible on Leadership: From Moses to Matthew -- Management Lessons for Contemporary Leaders*. New York, NY: AMACOM, 2002.

Wright, Christopher, J.H., *Deuteronomy*, Understanding the Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994 Kindle.