

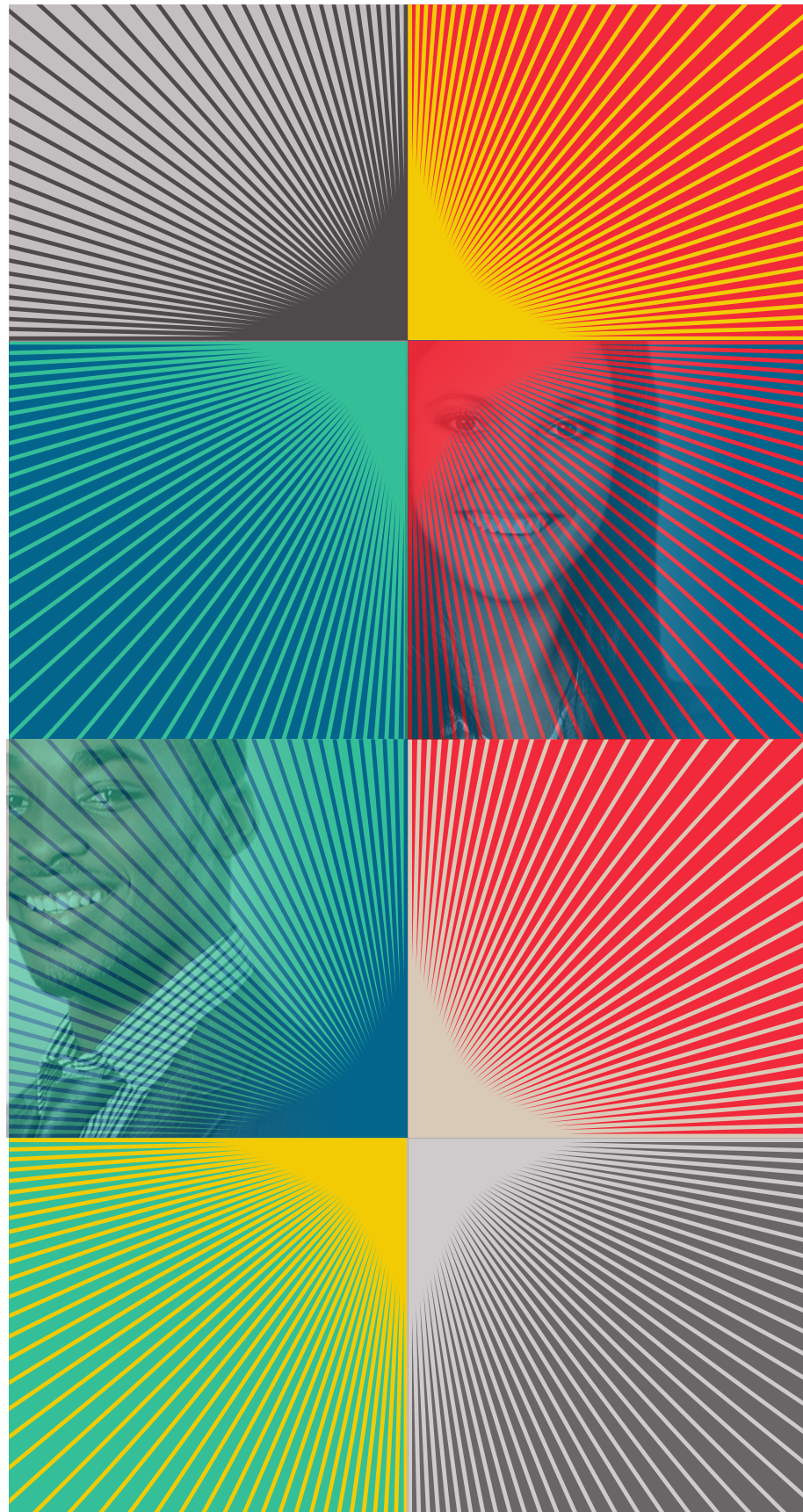
# Next in Line

| Eight keys for successful succession

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By STEVE GHIRINGHELLI







**The biggest tsunami** about to hit the church is succession. Around one-third of the churches in America will go through a pastoral transition in the next 10 years. —Sam Chand



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## With very little warning, the senior pastor

of a thriving 2,000-member church left the pulpit. In distress, the church scrambled and selected a staff member to become interim pastor. That man gained an audience, and the church board was forced to submit him for a vote. When he wasn't elected, he launched an independent church down the road—taking around 600 members with him. The church scrambled again and found another candidate. True story. That person was not selected either. The church further splintered. Two years later, with a massive campus to pay for, dwindling numbers in the seats and heartache all around, the church still has no successor.

### What went wrong?

Church leadership consultants say not many are immune to the shockwaves of a failed church succession. Pastors and their families feel slighted. Church staff and members take sides. Visitors and newcomers grow confused.

But as sad as such stories may be, the prevalence of botched successions is actually a relatively recent phenomenon, loosely tied to the rise of megachurches and the sprawling growth of independent, nondenominational worship centers, church transition experts say.

They point out how bishops have handled priest succession in the Catholic Church for centuries while many Protestant denominations later assumed the same role. As experienced outside third parties, these established authorities can act as sounding boards, provide valuable guidance and help adjudicate church transitions impartially.

“Nowadays, succession is all over the map,”

says former university president and church leadership expert Sam Chand. “Some churches immediately shrink in size. Others close down when the founding pastor retires. Sadly, sustainability is not even a consideration at times.”

Yet, whether a church is independent, part of a network or falls under a denomination, Chand says ensuring leaders are honored and congregations thrive long after a pastor leaves should be the goals of any well-designed succession plan.

“First and foremost, succession is about honor,” Chand says. “The long-term planning, the tangible manifestations, the assurances of an enduring testimony for the church and the community—it’s about honor. If the process is by design and not default, there will be honor.”

Chand says when churches are forced to create a hasty succession plan predisposed to the whims of internal stakeholders, honor and sustainability are much less likely outcomes. And that hard reality will be even more pronounced over the next 10 years, as aging senior pastors begin transitioning from their churches.

According to a study from Barna Group and Pepperdine University, the median age of all Protestant pastors in America increased from 44 to 54 between 1992 and 2017. The same study showed the number of pastors age 40 and under had dropped by 50 percent, while pastors over the age of 55 had doubled and those 65 and older nearly tripled.

“The biggest tsunami about to hit the church is succession,” Chand says. “Around one-third of the churches in America will go through a pastoral transition in the next 10 years.”

Complicating matters more, the coming exodus will include many pastors who pioneered churches known for their explosive growth. These architects of America’s modern-day worship centers may be visionary leaders who are not easily replaced.

“There’s a very small list of young people with the qualifications that equip them to handle a church of 3,000 members,” notes church consultant Ron McManus, one of the nation’s leading interim pastors and one-time president of EQUIP, John Maxwell’s global leadership institute.





In the Assemblies of God, one of the largest Pentecostal denominations in the United States, churches with 400-plus congregants have grown by leaps and bounds over the last few years while smaller ones consistently declined, according to Dr. Mike Clarensau of Southwestern Assemblies of God University. These larger churches comprise less than seven percent of the entire denomination, yet account for more than half of all Sunday morning worshippers and two-thirds of all conversions.

McManus says while larger churches certainly play a crucial role in the future of the Assemblies of God and many other groups, succession planning is important across all denominations, networks and independent churches.

#### MAURY'S STORY

As a highly sought-after coach, strategist and leadership consultant, Chand has spent decades working closely with hundreds of leaders, church boards and senior pastors. On the topic of succession, he remembers with great affection a large Nashville-based megachurch he helped transition from father to son in October 2018.

Maury Davis had been pastoring Cornerstone Church for over 20 years when he was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 2013. With a loose succession plan developed by Chand already in place with the church board and his son, Galen, Davis began to get his house in order. He managed a \$17-million church expansion project to completion; he embarked on a cross-country motorcycle trip with his youngest son, Dillon; and he took time to visit Pastor J. Don George, then-senior pastor of Calvary Church in Irving, Texas, the man who led him to the Lord in a Dallas jail more than 40 years ago. "Pastor George was the hero of my life," Davis recalls. "I wanted him to pray for me."

After that special visit to Texas, Davis says the markers in his next round of blood tests "just disappeared," and he was completely healed of leukemia.

With a new lease on life, Davis embraced the transition process, and Chand coached him to discover his next adventure, introducing him to a global network of other pastors who

became his new friends. Over the next few years, Davis was traveling around the world. Each time he was invited someplace, his son preached at Cornerstone.

But a new and painful part of transitioning began emerging. Davis says his first taste of it came in early 2018, when a longtime friend and church board member pulled him aside and told him: "It feels weird when you come back."

Davis recalls how the church was transitioning faster than he was. "People were connecting to Galen, which was a very good thing. For me, it was a very difficult thing."

Church members slowly stopped turning to him with their questions. At staff meetings, he became more and more a background fixture. "It was quite an emotional transition," he says. "It's like your little girl getting married, getting a flat tire and saying she doesn't need you for things like that anymore."

One of the most poignant moments in his transition came during a meeting in which a church board member, showing great honor and sensitivity, made a motion to make Galen Davis pastor-elect. Davis says he looked at Chand and nearly broke down in tears. He knew it was the right time. The vote was unanimous.

#### EIGHT TIPS FOR TRANSITION

McManus says each church transition is remarkably unique and no two succession plans are ever alike. However, he says church transitions do fall loosely into the following three categories.

- **Legacy Transition.** Like most rabbinic successions in the Jewish faith for millennia, a father passes authority to a son (often includes spiritual father to spiritual son).
- **Standard Transition.** The pastor is leaving, but an interim pastor will bridge the gap until the next pastor is officially installed.
- **Troubled Transition.** There has been a major crisis, and someone needs to come in immediately to salvage the situation and nurse the church back to health.

While legacy transitions are the ideal, McManus has spent the past 20 years involved in mostly standard and troubled transitions and asked to step in as an interim pastor to



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lead churches without a pastor through their transition.

He says without the buffer of an interim pastor, especially during a troubled transition, the chances of a new pastor succeeding beyond three or four years “drop significantly,” mostly because the people haven’t emotionally unplugged from their last leader. “That’s why it is so important that pastors consider their succession and begin planning for their future transition as soon as they can.”

When considering a succession plan, McManus and Chand say pastors should examine the following eight steps before, during and after the transition process to guide their thinking and dig deeper into the issues.

**01 Study your financial picture.** Following transition, more than half of all pastors leave the church completely while roughly one-third of them stay on staff in some capacity, according to Barna Research. With most senior leaders moving on to something else, the financial picture of any succession plan is crucial to their family’s provision and should be considered years before transitioning.

McManus says one of the main reasons pastors won’t transition is financial. Most are married, and the spouse may be struggling to come to terms with leaving the church as well. “A great number of pastors have unstable retirement packages and cannot live off of the fixed income their package affords,” he says.

Ensuring a pastor and their spouse will be in a strong enough position financially after leaving the church is one of the first conversations to be had with someone contemplating transition.

**02 Find another vocation.** Pastors who have pastored for a long time may find that their identity is inextricably tied to what they do. Ahead of transitioning, Chand encourages pastors to be conscious of what they are leaving “from” and where are they are going “to.”

A pastor he is working with now will transition next year to “global pastor,” a term Chand coined to describe a former pastor who works closely with the new senior pastor on various

assignments, such as targeted pastoral care, overseas engagements and donor development.

If the transitioning pastor doesn’t have a “to,” they will default to the “from,” Chand says. “We work very hard on the ‘to.’ Where will they go? What will they do? If they stay in the church, what will and what will not be their new role?”

**03 Create a comprehensive strategy.** Chand’s first order of business is performing a top-to-bottom assessment of the church’s entire ecosystem, looking at everything from infrastructure and finances to governance and mission/vision. “This is because a doctor operating on your kidneys may want to know your heart rate and blood pressure, too,” he says. “A pastor may not be telling me everything—not because he’s hiding anything, but he may not think something is important, or he may just be tangentially aware.”

As he learns more, he helps the church create benchmarks into a customized transition plan that will measure progress. Benchmarks include pragmatic ones, such as a house selling, children finishing school or a church contract being worked out. For legacy transitions, he tailors the benchmarks to include things like team-building, pulpit communication and fundraising.

**04 Develop profiles.** Chand asks outgoing pastors to contribute to the creation of a “preferred profile,” a sort of wish list of the next pastor’s attributes. As a team member, the current pastor has a full say in the development, but not a vote. Right up front, the preferred profile focuses on a few of the church’s non-negotiables, or the qualities a candidate should possess in keeping with the DNA of the church.

The following is an example of one such profile.

Our Church is searching for our next visionary, Lead Pastor; committed to the power and presence of God, growing a body of believers, spiritually maturing disciples, missions—local/global partnerships, and Bible-centered preaching/teaching.





We are seeking an ordained minister, preferable with:

- 5 years multicultural experience leading a congregation of 1,000 people or more
- 35-50 years of age
- married
- advanced education
- rudimentary understanding of accounting/finances/law
- church administration experience, particularly leading a multi-staff
- ability/desire to build a collaborative team
- ability/desire to connect and network with community organizations/non-profits
- spiritual maturity/emotional maturity
- relational—outgoing extrovert
- willingness to mentor and be mentored (i.e. succession)
- committed to staying 10-plus years

In addition, pastors and board members help create a “church profile” for sending to interested candidates, providing details such as the church budget, staff count, demographic data, church history, sanctuary size, membership and attendance and campus photos.

**15 Establish a plan for selection.** Denominations have various policies for selecting a new leader, many of them differing even if just slightly from each other. And while some denominations exercise substantial control in the decision-making process, others function quite autonomously during a church succession.

When selecting a successor, nearly two-thirds of evangelical churches elect a new leader by congregational vote, according to the most recently released data from the National Association of Evangelicals. The same poll found that 10 percent of new pastors are appointed by a board, five percent by the denomination and three percent by a selection committee.

But a cohesive transition roadmap, or the knowledge of how to design one, is not always found in the constitution and bylaws of many churches, especially independent ones. If unclear, McManus may recommend that the

board create a special committee and determine whether the church prefers a congregational vote or some other variation of election for the selection process.

**16 Implement a communications plan.** Determine what, when, to whom and via what platform information should be communicated. Once a candidate is selected, the transition can take as little as six months, but should not exceed two years. Chand says things like a fear of congregational loss can cause leadership groups to move either too rapidly or too slowly through the process. By employing transparency, clear communications and regular engagements with the members of the church, the initial behind-the-scenes consultations among board members, pastors and outsiders are much less likely to become a spectacle.

“If you engage everyone, they may like the process or not like the process,” Chand says. “But either way, they will know what is going on. There will be transparency and integrity throughout the process.”

**17 Don’t forget the “God Factor.”** During the selection process, the best options don’t always emerge early. Candidates with sufficient leadership capacity or experience are rarely among the more readily available. In addition, some in-house leaders are often seen through rose-colored glasses. Current staff or even assigned interim pastors are not evaluated accurately, but can have their qualifications inflated by virtue of their availability and familiarity.

Compounding the challenges, some pastors and church boards may become influenced by less-than-qualified outside voices, which can include other church peers, ministry leaders or even pastors. “A mature and spiritually attuned board will listen when they need to listen and marginalize the other influences,” Chand says. “Instead of maybe focusing only on what is available, consider if the Holy Spirit is stirring someone else.”

Chand says he has known pastors who seem productive and very engaged but are quietly taking their thoughts about a transition to the Lord. “Then one day, there’s a call out of the

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blue,” he says. “That happened to me. That’s happened to many others. We should never count out the ‘God factor.’”

**18 Write down your exit strategy.** Chand says he has assisted with developing strategic pathways for many outgoing pastors over the years, more or less putting up guardrails to keep the church on course. Regardless of where they will land afterward, outgoing pastors will honor the process by not returning for a predetermined span of time, usually three to six months, depending on context and circumstances. This not only helps them disengage and resist the urge to meddle, but also ensures the new pastor finds his or her legs.

The last sermon can be difficult. Pastors getting up before their church for the last time often struggle to keep it together. To inject some levity, Chand has told some pastors to leave their beloved congregants laughing by inserting some type of don’t-call-me-I’ll-call-you footnote at the end of their speech.

“If you need to talk about anything to do with the church,” Chand suggests in the sermon notes, “please do not contact me. You also need to know that if you do contact me with an issue concerning the church, I will first of all, not respond, and second, I will forward it to the new pastor.”

The watchword throughout the transition process is honor, not only honor for the family that is transitioning out but also honor for the new pastor and family who are arriving.

**LEGACY**

To a great extent, many of the painful stories of an unsuccessful church succession normally reveal a lack of planning or a refusal to accept outside assistance with developing a plan. Adhering to a plan and purpose during a succession brings greater peace and fulfillment during what can be an emotionally tumultuous time.

Maury Davis recalls one of the rawest moments of his transition, which came on the day of his last message in October 2018.

Davis and his wife, Gail, had left Texas nearly 30 years earlier to come pastor a little Nashville church with a building that was in the process of being repossessed. They had sold everything they had to keep it from being taken over. He was now preaching, after being away for a few months, his last sermon at Cornerstone.

“What I realized that day was that many of the people there didn’t know who I was,” Davis says. “What was a climactic moment for me and my family was actually an anticlimactic moment for maybe half the church.”

Davis understands that a thriving Cornerstone Church under the leadership of his oldest son will be the most important measure of the legacy he leaves behind. That’s why he told the church media team ahead of time to take down every online sermon, teaching and video clip of his and scrub the church’s website so that his name only appeared on its history page. He wanted his son to be the pastor without anyone ever trying to compare the two.

The morning after his final message, Davis says he woke up to a new grace in his life. Though it’s still strange to no longer preach on days like Easter Sunday, Mother’s Day or Christmas candlelight service, he says the work of the Lord continuing means more than anything to him at this point.

It’s an important conclusion. In the end, Chand says pastors who sincerely endeavor to leave behind a strong and sustainable church find it easier to let go in time. He says if they admit the Lord built the church they are leading, they know right away that it’s not about them.

“It’s about honor,” he says. “It’s about legacy. And it’s about God’s work continuing.” ■

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**STEVE GHIRINGHELLI** is a freelance writer and editor who has worked for newspapers, magazines and non-profit organizations. He lives in Charleston, S.C., where he and his wife have four children.



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