

Leading Through a Senior Pastor Transition

Nothing jolts a church quite like the resignation of its senior pastor. Shock, disbelief, confusion, disappointment. And that's just the get-go of the attending reactions and emotions. While the inner circle of leadership may see it coming, for the most part, the church family is blindsided and is catapulted quickly into a deep sense of uncertainty and unsettledness. I know, I've been there. Twice—with a front row seat.

Leading a church during a season of transition from one senior pastor to the next can be a substantial challenge—but it also can be a very valuable time in the life of your church. Through the years, as an executive pastor, I've had the opportunity to lead two large churches (under very different circumstances), through such a season. Here are some of the lessons learned that I trust will provide you with both encouragement and direction as you lead those entrusted to your care.

Keep perspective. Even under the best of circumstances, the departure of a senior pastor brings a measure of unsettledness throughout the church family. One of your priority tasks is to remind people repeatedly that God is intimately aware of your situation and more importantly, has a good plan for your church. Transitions provide a huge opportunity to grow in our trust (“the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen”) of God and His provision.

Provide continuity. In seasons of change, people are uncertain and become anxious about the perceived amount of change that is on the horizon.

One of the highlights that God orchestrated to bring healing to our fractured and hurting church family took place at one of the first mid-week prayer gatherings that we had initiated during our time of transition. At the close of the time, one of our long-time members asked if he could address the group. With words delivered from deep within, he confessed the hardness of his heart towards those in church leadership. It was beautiful—Holy Spirit-authored. Following his words, and without rehearsal, both our church chair and myself simultaneously got out of seats and went up to embrace our brother and to extend grace—the same kind that God has given us. It is the leader's job to call this out (and live it out) and to speak directly to this anxiety. On the first weekend of our church's senior pastor transition, I addressed this dynamic by affirming that though we are entering a season of change, there are many things that do NOT change. First, that our gospel message of Christ crucified does not change. And second, our mission to expand God's Kingdom by becoming and developing wholehearted, full-engaged followers of Jesus Christ does not change.

Provide stability. In transition, people need the assurance that the church and its ministries go on without interruption or compromise. Unless there are exceptional reasons, the life of the church needs to go on as it has in the past. A key part of providing stability is to determine your approach to the pulpit ministry. In the first transition I led, we employed the “rotation system” using a variety of staff and outside preachers; in the second, we brought in ONE person to do the majority of the preaching. For the sake of stability, I recommend the latter. With this approach, we decided to have a couple of our senior pastoral leaders involved in each weekend service so that our people would see a familiar face and sense that we were in “**business as usual**” mode.

Look ahead. During a chapter of change, it is normal for people to want to focus on the past and what they have lost. While appropriate time and attention needs to be given to the past, ultimately the prevailing focus needs to be on the future and how to prepare for it. One of the transitions I was a part of involved some very intense disagreements among both the leaders and the church members which in turn lead to a lot of relationship fallout. Given that reality, we needed to heal and to restore those relationships. In this endeavor, one of the many things we did included a message on how to restore fractured relationships. During that message, we announced that the following weekend, we would be celebrating communion with a clear call to use the upcoming week to repair relationships that had been broken. A lot of homework (or should I say, “heartwork”) took place that week.

Seek outside help. When the departure of a senior pastor is attended by a great deal of disappointment or hurt or anger, it is important to consider the use of a third party to create a context and process for how to move forward in a healthy manner. When trust is low, often the current leaders will not have enough credibility on deposit to navigate the church through stormy seas. During one such transition, we brought in an organization (Peacemaker Ministries) with a strong track record in dealing with churches in our particular situation. Their partnership and effectiveness was an essential part of our preparing for the next chapter of ministry.

Emphasize prayer. If there is a silver lining in the occasional dark clouds of transition, it is the renewed desire of the church family to seek God in new and deeper ways. We launched a weekly prayer gathering. We also had a week of waiting, praying and fasting where we gathered each night to worship and cry out to the Lord. Additionally, at the close of one of the first messages at the start of our transition, I asked for a commitment to pray daily for the church during this season of change. It was a powerful worship service when hundreds of people signed a commitment card and brought it to the altar. Each week during the transition, I would email a prayer letter to those people throughout the two years of our search process.

Advance the mission. When transition comes, people need to know that it is not a time for retreating or place holding, but a time to move forward with God’s Kingdom purposes. This is particularly important for the staff of the church. They need to know that they are still on task; that the mission is still in play and not to throttle back. Finding a church wide initiative is key here—something behind which everyone can rally. For us, it was a ‘community day’ where hundreds of us showed up at one of our local middle schools and spent the day doing a campus makeover. We also developed a friendship with a church in New Orleans where its members’ homes had been devastated by Hurricane Katrina and over two years’ time sent dozens of our members there to rebuild homes and more importantly, hearts.

(Over) Communicate. In times of (unwanted) change, it is human nature to fill in the proverbial blanks of life with a narrative that is faulty or jaded. In such a season, clear and frequent communication is essential. Each weekend as people gathered for worship, they would be met by a letter in our worship program from either our church chair or executive pastor. This letter would serve two primary purposes. First, it was designed to rally around a renewed commitment to pray, around an upcoming church wide ministry, etc. And second, it was a platform to let people know what was going on “behind the scenes” – an attempt to pull back the curtain on discussions and decisions that were taking place among the church leaders.

Seek counsel. If you are the point person tasked to lead your church through a season of transition, then job one is to surround yourself with the wisdom and safety of many counselors. In addition to regular dialogue with our congregational leaders, one of the ways that I sought out wisdom was in appointing an advisory team made up of people with a variety of gifts and strengths. Each week, I would meet with this group of trusted people. In those meetings, we vetted practically every major aspect of the ministry with a commitment to sustain the momentum of the Holy Spirit wherever possible. It was also a place where I could get a wide “pulse beat” of the church family. And it was a safe place to talk about our fears and concerns and to remind

ourselves that we are not on our own, that we walk together, and that our God is big... and good.

Anticipate a “new song”. Perhaps the greatest blessing that gets tucked into a time of transition is the expectation of a new work of God. I encourage you to take your people to Psalm 40 and to immerse their hearts in the promise that our God is the ultimate Writer of a new song. At times, we may wrestle with His timing, but mark it down, God’s blessing belongs to those who dare to allow Him to write a new song—songs not on lifeless parchments, but on receptive, seeking hearts. And what He writes will be amazingly beautiful, wholly original, and more than likely, will take your breath away.

Perhaps some of these lessons learned will be of benefit to you and your church. But whatever the storyline is of the transition you lead, go with the confidence that God wants to take your ‘season of change’ and transform it into a ‘season of significance’. Remember, the past is His record book of miracles fulfilled, but the future is His canvas of miracles yet to be!