



The 10

COMMANDMENTS of SUCCESSION PLANNING

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NEXT: Pastoral Succession that Works
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There is no singular pattern or set of rules for succession planning. But throughout our studies, we've seen a few cardinal rules pop up. They're stunningly clear and universally applicable, no matter your situation. The ideas can apply whether you're thirty-two or sixty-two, whether it's your second year at your current church or your twenty second, and whether or not you're in a denominational appointment system.

You shape your future more than you realize. Too many pastors push away ideas of succession planning, initially thinking of it as an unrealistic task. Indeed the unknown variables abound. They include not knowing the future burdens and dreams God might develop in your heart, the health and growth momentum of your present church, the ongoing "fit" between you and your present church, what your church board or district superintendent might do, or how your health or family circumstances might change.

However, in reality you can do much to plan your future, beginning with the immediate present.

1. READ *NEXT* WITH OTHERS.

First, ask your board to read it. If you're a young pastor processing this book, you are already headed in the right direction. Whatever your age and no matter how long you've been at your church, your board will appreciate knowing that you want to plan for your church's future as well as your own.

Additionally, find a trusted friend or colleague to read the book with you. You may think that few if any of your colleagues are seriously contemplating succession, especially if you're younger. But you're wrong. An increasing number welcome the conversation if they can know how to do it in a safe context and with a practical resource.

2. SET A HEALTHY PACE.

If you don't have one, establish a sabbatical policy in conjunction with your church board. The most common practice is a paid three-month break every seven years. If you're a multi-staff church, include them in the policy.

Additionally, consider mandating a policy that requires you and your pastoral staff to actually take your days off and vacation time. Also, if you're not in one, find an accountability group that can be your safety net. Too many successions are on the heels of a moral or financial failure. And nearly every one of those failures happened because the pastors were a) tired and b) didn't have anyone to talk to about their personal fatigue.

3. EMERGENCY ENVELOPE

It's important to formulate an emergency succession plan and communicate various pieces to the proper parties. This isn't as daunting as you might think. Ask yourself this question: "What would happen next if I were hit by a bus today?" Answer it on two levels: personal and church. On the personal side, is your family provided for? Do you have adequate life insurance? Disability insurance? (You're seven times more likely to be disabled than to die during your work years.) A will? If you have children, have you named a guardian for them if their other parent dies as well? In your personal finances, if you have debt, are you on a path toward financial freedom and a life of ever-increasing generosity toward others?

On the church side, how prepared is your congregation if that bus should take your life or incapacitate you for an extended season? Is the church prepared by knowing who would be in charge in the first hours of your absence? Who would preach on the initial Sundays? Who would carry out your key duties? Form a plan, write it down, and have your board collaborate with and/or approve the plan.

Now ask each staff or key volunteer to create their own "hit by a bus" plan for their own succession. Affirm that they should all include the idea of actively developing one or more apprentices (more on this in #6 below).

Finally, add a line item in your church budget for emergency/interim hires. Or create a financial reserve buffer that could be used for this purpose. To determine the amount, imagine, if you as the pastor were sick for a three-month period, how much funding would be needed to bring in and pay guest preachers?

4. UNFORESEEN DEPARTURE

Succession is not a synonym for retirement. It's also not just about emergency planning. Many other reasons for departure can come up. You might sense God's leading to leave your current church for another one. You might decide to leave ministry for another profession. Trends are showing this to be more and more common.

Does your church have a plan for how to handle a vacancy outside of your emergency plan? Who would determine how a search team would be created? Have you developed internal candidates from your current staff or perhaps from a key volunteer? Do you have a short list of people who might be candidates to replace you, such as one of your teaching team, a favorite guest speaker, sons/daughters of the church now serving elsewhere, or previous associate pastors? Are there rules or bylaws you need to establish now, such as whether you would allow current staff to be considered? Do any other board policies or church bylaws need to be created now to preclude a future crisis or conflict? Would you hire a search firm? Write out your process. Have it board approved and communicated to the appropriate people and accessible by more than one person.

5. ANTICIPATE YOUR RETIREMENT

Some succession is linked to retirement. Is part of your compensation set aside for retirement? The primary reason many pastors hang on to their job too long is a lack of finances for retirement. Boards should have a compensation committee that meets to help you plan now for your eventual sunset years. Request funds for the use of an outside CFA or CFP. If the church has one who offers to work pro bono, request the financial equivalent of CFA fees be deposited into your retirement account.

6. ANNUALLY EVALUATE

Place "succession planning" both as the first item of your own annual performance review and also schedule a full board meeting once a year to discuss the state of your succession plan. Succession planning is an ongoing process, not a single event. The discussion can include many of the elements in these "ten commandments."

Suppose you're developing your son as your successor. What experiences does he need in the coming year in the next step of his development? What kind of staff, volunteer or paid, does he need to be developing? Or if your plan is not yet that specific, what do you need to do in the coming year to develop, strengthen, and "test" the pool of potential candidates in your leadership pipeline?

7. BROAD CULTURE OF LEADERSHIP

Intentionally build a leadership pipeline by making relationship-based leadership development a regular part of your planning, programming, and budgeting. Develop a system in which many people at many levels are offered next steps in their own leadership development. Could you use the small groups and other ministries in your church to create pathway through which someone, if called by God and suitably gifted, can receive training to travel the journey from new Christian to apprentice, or missionary? In the spirit of 2 Timothy 2:2, what if you create an environment of apprentices, interns, and assistants in which every leader, both paid and volunteer, sees it as their number one job to develop one or more other leaders? A church-wide culture of leadership development will not only help your church in its current mission but will also help develop potential future successors.

8. SHARE THE TEACHING

If you haven't done so already, now is the time to be proactive in building a well-rounded teaching team. This involves far more than making a preaching roster or giving visibility to certain politically important people in your church or denomination. Creating a culture where the church isn't dependent on one communicator will mitigate the damage of a sudden departure of the pastor. If you're a smaller church or cannot afford a second teaching pastor, or do not have ready access to capable communicators (such as through a nearby para church ministry or seminary), consider having a "preaching contest" among the laity, allowing the winner or top finishers a chance to deliver the weekend message. Our friends at Austin Stone Community Church, Austin Texas, have done this with amazing success.

9. SHARE THE LEADING

This is a very different function from a preaching team. The senior pastor should identify key staff with potential for higher levels of leadership and be intentional about mentoring them to participate regularly in senior-level decisions. The goal would be to make sure each of the senior pastor's responsibilities has one or more people who have participated in it enough that they could take it over. Another way to approach this is to make a list of what presently "only" the senior pastor knows in terms of information about the church and how it is run, and then train others by enlarging the circle of senior-level decision making. Doing so will also preclude the idea of a personality driven church culture or environment.

10. LOOK BEYOND THE BATON PASS

If your succession is a retirement scenario, what will you do with your time once you've stepped down? Having a clear identity and role will make the transition out of the pulpit much easier. Could you begin building a nonprofit around an area of your ministry? Could you become certified as a interim pastor? What else has God blessed in your ministry and given you passion for that you might do part-time as you transition from full-time pastoral ministry? Is there something you and your spouse have dreamed about doing together at this stage in your life and marriage?