

EFFECTIVE SENIOR PASTOR TRANSITIONS

A Brief Overview of Orderly Transition Options

Every church faces a season when the senior pastor leadership changes. The causes and circumstances vary from retirement, resignation to lead another ministry, unexpected death, request from lay leadership or membership to resign, or removal due to leadership or character failure. In congregational church government the membership elects the senior pastor of its choice. The official lay leadership leads the process of pastor selection by forming the search or pulpit committee. They may include on the committee other members as advisors or voting members. Some congregationally-governed churches have lay leaders designated by name as deacons while other churches have both lay elders and deacons in addition to a pastor and pastoral staff.

Transition from one senior pastor to the next should be done in a deliberate, orderly, and unified manner. The church's constitution should clearly lay out the basic process through which a new senior pastor is chosen.

Option 1 – Pastor Search from Scratch

Smaller churches with only one pastor and no additional pastoral staff usually find themselves with a pastoral void when a pastor resigns or retires. Those churches will hopefully be able to employ either regular pulpit supply preachers or an interim pastor as they look for a new pastor. If they only have pulpit supply preachers and not an interim pastor, the lay leaders will take care of the church administration and pastoral care. The pastoral search process will likely take from six months (short) to twelve months (normal) to eighteen months (long). Having a pre-planned transition to the next pastor is ideal but sometimes too idealistic for the small church.

Mid-size churches and larger churches with more complex ministries (Christian school, day care, etc.) should give special consideration to a planned senior pastor transition. Life and ministry are not always predictable, but good planning really helps. If no one on the pastoral staff is suitable to cover the primary preaching responsibilities of these churches, it is advisable to acquire a seasoned interim pastor, a retired pastor, or someone else with no interest in becoming the next senior pastor of the church.

Option 2 – Pastoral Staff Member Advances to Senior Pastor

Here are several options for senior pastor transitions when there is time to plan ahead. In these options the current senior pastor will stay in his official office as pastor until the new pastor is ready to start his official new duties as pastor. This scenario most likely takes place in the last several years prior to an aging senior pastor's retirement. The current senior pastor and the lay leaders work together to identify a transition plan and prospective next senior pastor. After much prayer and planning, the pastor and leaders communicate the desire for an orderly and effective transition to the congregation. A pastor who is approaching retirement may also choose to communicate these thoughts to the congregation for some time prior to actually commencing the focused transition plan.

One good option is for the church to advance a current member of the pastoral staff to become the senior pastor. If this is God's provision, the choice will be apparent to the leadership and membership of the church. Such a staff member prospect is already ministering effectively within his current responsibilities, probably as an assistant pastor. This ideal situation is least likely to be disruptive and most likely to be well-accepted by most people and makes for an orderly transition. Once the church votes for the assistant pastor to become the senior pastor, the man should assume his new role within a month or so. If the vote fails to meet the required percentage, it would probably be wisest for the assistant pastor to resign before or when a new senior pastor comes.

Option 3 – New Pastoral Staff Member Called with a Succession Plan in View

If no current pastoral staff member is suitable to become senior pastor, the church may call an assistant or associate pastor with a view toward his becoming the next pastor. He comes in to serve for one-to-three years and is mentored by the outgoing pastor. He should preach enough to grow into his coming role, learning to preach more effectively as he makes self-critical adjustments and improvements. He should progressively be given more responsibility in the church leadership.

The greatest differences between being an assistant pastor and a senior pastor are the volume of new sermons to prepare and deliver, the critical nature of pastoral care with acute congregational needs, and the full weight of administrative oversight. It takes time to grow into such responsibilities. In this scenario, the church membership would vote again to confirm their choice of the assistant pastor becoming the senior pastor. If the vote is positive, the new pastor should assume his responsibilities within a month to six weeks.

Option 4 – New Pastoral Staff Member Called with a Definite Succession Plan Decided

The church calls a man from outside the church to become the associate pastor or co-pastor with the full understanding that he is coming to be the new pastor of the church. The lay leadership, the outgoing pastor, and the incoming pastor all agree on a fixed timetable for the actual transfer of senior pastor responsibilities. The transfer could take place in six months (short), twelve months, eighteen months, or twenty-four (long). The membership is informed of the transition schedule. A shorter timetable is better than a longer one. When the membership votes on the new man they are voting on him to eventually be the new pastor. No additional vote is needed to confirm that he is to be the new senior pastor.

These are the best and most frequently practiced options, although other possibilities exist. Each has its own advantages and disadvantages. But in the end, God gives joy with accomplishing the mission, the transition is made, and God is pleased by the orderly, unified, Spirit-led process for the effectiveness of ongoing church ministry.