

Transition Tips for Retiring Pastors

By Bruce McAllister

The day will inevitably come when a man will no longer be able to serve as a senior pastor. Most pastors do not like to think of such a time. They love the ministry the Lord has given them. They love their people. They love shepherding, preaching, teaching, and leading. They cannot imagine not doing what they have loved doing for a lifetime. But the time will come, and the wise pastor and his wife should prayerfully and carefully prepare themselves. God has a plan in His good timing. By using the word *retirement*, we mean *refocus*—not stopping ministry. Here are a few tips to consider.

Be Prepared

Many choices made while young and in middle age will affect retirement from the full-time senior pastorate. A pastor should plan wisely for both him and his wife to have adequate income for living expenses, a place to live, and medical care and benefits. While churches should assist pastors in planning for their financial future, the reality is that many churches are small and have limited resources. Therefore, it falls primarily to the pastor and his wife to make good financial decisions throughout their lives. If possible, they should buy their own home, pay the mortgage in full, have retirement investments and savings, and hopefully be able to leave an inheritance to their children. It is wise to start saving early and stay with it.

Be Realistic

The average retirement age in America is the mid-sixties. Some pastors will retire in their mid-sixties while others will press on until 70 or slightly beyond. If a pastor is healthy, motivated, clear-thinking, and capable, he may be able to stretch out a few more years of full-time ministry. For example, let's choose 70 as a good target age to step down from full-time senior pastorate responsibilities. Then let's work backward to find a workable timetable for planning. When a pastor is ready to initiate his transition, it will likely take two to three years to transition smoothly out of the senior role and have a chosen successor in place. This means a man planning to retire at age 70 should be thinking about it by age 65 and starting quietly to make transition plans by age 67. If a man plans to step down at age 65, the process starts mentally by age 60 and with the lay leadership at age 63.

Be Prudent

There are different ways that churches like to choose their next senior pastors. (See the article on this website "Effective Senior Pastor Transitions.") If a pastor has been with the church for a lifetime or several decades and has a great relationship with the church and its leadership, the lay leaders may warmly invite his guidance regarding the selection of the next pastor. However, this

is not common when a man has been pastor for ten years or less. A man must be prudent in proceeding. The outgoing pastor could talk confidentially with the most trusted older lay leader in the church to get a sense for the preferred approach and timing in transition planning. The pastor should **not** talk openly to the congregation about his retirement plans until he has made his own definite plan and until the church lay leadership is well-prepared, ready, and in essential agreement. An outgoing pastor's premature communication of his plans causes people to be unsettled, confused, have their confidence undermined, creates a "lame duck" pastor, and can even lead to dissension.

Be Patient

If a church starts earnestly looking for a new pastor today and all goes well, they can expect the process of putting the new pastor in place to take up to a year. This timetable is the norm for almost all churches. It assumes that the search committee is diligent throughout the long process. Today far more churches need pastors than the number of pastoral candidates who are available. An outgoing pastor and lay leadership may want to time the conclusion of the pastor's ministry so that there is no gap between pastors. Another option is for the church to line up an interim pastor in advance. There are many advantages to having an interim pastor. (See "The Incredible Ministry of the Interim Pastor.")

Be Definite

A definite termination date should be established for the retiring pastor; the length of the tenure should not be open-ended or left up to him. If there is to be some overlap or mentoring of a new younger pastor, a termination date should most certainly be set and observed. The worst problem in transitions is when the outgoing pastor is not willing to let go and leave, thus frustrating the incoming new pastor about when he will officially become the pastor. Pastors and lay leaders and church members should be clear in planning and hold firmly to their plans. It is wise to establish a definite start date for the new pastor as well, and to communicate everything in writing.

Be Considerate

Should the retiring pastor and his wife stay in the church or find another church home? Many factors affect this decision. Generally, it is best for the retiring pastor to relocate to another church and possibly even another city or state. The personalities of both the retiring pastor and his wife make a big difference here. The history of cordiality between the pastor, his wife, and the church matters. The interpersonal dynamics of the outgoing and incoming pastors and their wives are big factors. If a pastor and his wife have served in the same church for a long time and if they have humble attitudes, it is possible that an arrangement can be worked out with the new pastor, his wife, the lay leadership, and church membership to allow the retiring pastor and his

wife to continue in membership and attendance. Even if they are allowed to stay, it would be helpful if they could be away for a few months at the start of their retirement so that their absence can help the new pastor to get established.

Be Serving

True Christian service does not need the exercise of authority. Pastors are used to having authority. Leading becomes a natural reflex over time as a man constantly preaches, makes announcements, directs decisions, and counsels or advises. However, his pastoral authority ends with his termination date. His wife is no longer the “first lady.” This change can be disorienting to a man and his wife. They lose the sense of identity that they have had for so many years. This is a normal feeling for anyone transitioning out of full-time ministry, so a man and his wife should prepare themselves. They should plan to keep serving the Lord but in different ways such as in nursing homes, detention centers, family emergency shelters, or as an interim pastor.

Volunteering to serve with a mission agency, perhaps as short-term replacements for missionaries on furlough is another possibility. They should evangelize, disciple, mentor, and encourage others; expand their prayer life; write; invest time in their grandchildren; and volunteer in the community. Churches may desire a part-time seniors’ pastor, counselor, or have other staff needs. A man with a servant’s heart will never be without a ministry. It is wise to plan ahead in the years leading up to retirement to prepare for a niche that will be the right fit for a man and his wife. The plan should be to retire from one ministry to become active in another ministry. Then retirement will not be stopping but rather refocusing to “bear fruit in old age” (Psalm 92:14).