

# Pastoral Succession

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During the 2012 Leadership Summit Bill Hybels spoke about how he and his elders had recently embarked on a leadership succession process. He mentioned that there are thousands of mega churches around the world who are currently led by pastors in their sixties. In his opinion, most of these churches are in for troubled times because few have considered passing the leadership baton and even fewer know how to do it. I have no way of gauging how accurate his information is, but one thing is obvious; leadership succession, like death, is inevitable. Therefore, all churches, big and small, need to give serious attention to how to transition from retiring to younger leadership.

I am 65 years of age and for the last two years or so I have been engaging my eldership on how we are going to transition the church when I retire. To exacerbate the situation, our other senior pastor is due to retire in two years' time, just when I am planning to scale down my involvement. Because we are currently dealing with the realities of leadership transition I thought that it might be useful if I wrote an article for the benefit of other churches in a similar circumstance.

I was asked to pastor our church when it consisted of just 17 people and was meeting in a rundown shack on a piece of land earmarked for development into a town house complex. We now have about 550 adults and children regularly attending our services. I was 39 years old at the time and, as so often happens, I attracted quite a few people in their early forties. Most of them have stayed with the church and so now we have more than a sprinkling of white hair, or no hair, in our congregations. We are governed by a genuine plurality of elders and here too the majority hair colour is grey. The transition task before us is therefore three-fold. Firstly, we need a succession plan whereby we phase out the existing pastors, my colleague and I, and bring on a younger pastoral team. Secondly, we need to bring some younger men into eldership and, in addition, develop a younger team of deacons. Thirdly, we need to prepare the congregations and introduce change gradually yet transparently.

Five years ago we employed a 25 year old Associate Pastor, the son of a denominational minister. We, on the other hand, are an interdenominational/non-denominational church with our own particular ethos. Ever since he joined I have been meeting every week with this young man to discuss theology, values and vision. In addition I join him and our resident pastor once a week to discuss the on-going life of the church. During these meetings we also discuss pastoral case studies and focus on developing pastoral and leadership skills. On the occasions when our associate pastor preaches, I meet with him twice to work through his sermon. Obviously, he was assigned pastoral and administrative duties when he joined us but we now have a specific plan for handing over more and more oversight responsibility. I have included a graphical representation of this plan at the end of this article.

We have a strong focus on theology and expository preaching and so we have insisted that before becoming the main pastor of the church the young man needs to complete a B.Th honours degree through SATS. He is scheduled to complete his studies by the time the resident pastor retires.

Last year we selected twelve young couples and a few singles and I started meeting with them once a month on a Saturday morning. At these sessions we discussed our church values, priorities, vision and model. I expounded the biblical support for these, opened each subject up to discussion and presented case studies and current examples. From this group of existing and future young deacons we invited four to join the eldership team as 'appys'. The idea is that they serve in partnership with experienced elders until we, and they, are sure of their calling and suitability. In about two years' time they will be presented to the church members as candidate elders. Two of these young men respectfully declined the invitation and two accepted. I intend inviting a third to join the team in about a years' time. At the end of the process we hope to lower the average age of the eldership. To put it crudely, we want more elders who still have hair!

We have recently started the process of transitioning the congregations. I have explained to them that in two years' time I will be retiring as senior pastor but will remain as the lead elder of the church. For a further two years after that I will remain on part-time staff on a modest retainer, will meet with the new pastor and his team every week, and will preach once a month. The associate pastor is now playing a more dominant role in the general meetings of the church and next year he will start to preach twice a month.

In the church world there is very little material written on the subject of leadership succession and so we are sailing into largely uncharted waters. The key things we are considering are the following:

1. Examples of leadership transitions in the scriptures. I have looked at the apprenticeship model of the Old Testament prophets and the transition that Jesus made from himself to Peter.
2. Key considerations such as the time it takes to bring about change within a church body, the established values and ethos of the local church, the emotional impact on the congregation and on the retiring pastors, the role the retiring pastors will play once the new team is in place, the buy-in of the members, financial restraints and implications, and communication strategies.
3. The time line for the transition and the effect on major church programmes such as outreach.

Obviously this whole process has been and will continue to be the focus of prayer at both the eldership and congregational levels. We are trying to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying both scripturally and prophetically. We are talking to key church members and listening carefully to their concerns whilst trying to gauge the emotional content of what they are saying.

The local church is a precious and wonderful thing and we want it to go into the future even stronger than it has been in the past. The one question that has dominated our deliberations has and will remain, 'what is best for this church?'

