

EXPANDED and UPDATED

NEXT

PASTORAL SUCCESSION
THAT WORKS

WILLIAM VANDERBLOEMEN
and WARREN BIRD



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To protect the privacy of those who have shared their stories with the authors, some details and names have been changed. Whenever possible, however, people specifically named have reviewed their stories for accuracy.

This book is designed to provide general information on pastoral succession and related topics. It is not intended to provide legal, financial, or other professional advice. Readers are encouraged to seek the counsel and oversight of their local church leaders as well as competent professionals relevant to their situation.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Introduction to the New Edition by Eric Geiger and Kenton Beshore	11
Foreword to the Original Edition by John Ortberg	13
Preface to the Expanded and Updated Edition	15
Preface to the Original Edition	19

Part 1 WHY SUCCESSION PLANNING CAN'T WAIT

1. Why Every Leader Needs This Book 29
Top Reasons You and Your Ministry Should Start Planning for Succession Right Now
2. The Ten Commandments of Succession Planning 46
Practical Actions Whatever Your Age or Tenure
3. Three Essential Questions 60
What Is Succession Success? What Captures My Passion? How Are My Finances?
4. Ten Models of Post-Pastorate Professions 70
From Seminary Professor to Missions Pastor, Many Strong Options Exist
5. Deciding When It's Time to Leave 83
Finding Space and Permission to Explore the Options

6. Resigning “Young” to Start Another Ministry 94
And Does the Outgoing Pastor Always Need to Leave Town?
7. Four Church Cultures, Four Succession Styles 112
Plus One Cardinal Rule of Pastoral Succession
8. Founder’s Syndrome 120
What It Is and Why It Matters
9. Family Successions 130
Five Disaster Formulas to Avoid, and Five Best Practices to Follow

Part 2 BE THE EXCEPTION

10. Wisdom from Unlikely Sources 143
Transitions That Shouldn’t Have Worked but Did
11. What Happened at the Crystal Cathedral and First Baptist Dallas 154
A Close Look at Two Failed Successions
12. The Term Limit Factor 171
What Might Prevent Your Church from a Multi-Generation Run
13. Messy and Unexpected Endings 184
When Succession Follows Adultery, Nasty Church Splits, or Other Challenges
14. Interim Pastors—Some Unintentional, Some Intentional 195
How to Avoid Being the “Sacrifice Pastor”
15. Forced Farewell 206
What to Do If the Pastor Needs to Go but Doesn’t

Part 3 TRANSITION WELL, FINISH STRONG

16. Where to Find a Successor 215
Staff, Multisites, Former Interns, and Recommendations from Friends

17. The Money Question	229
<i>What It Really Costs to Finance a Pastoral Succession</i>	
18. Preparing for the Next Pastor	246
<i>Setting Up Your Successor's First One Hundred Days for Success</i>	
19. Thinking Long Term	258
<i>There Is No Success without Succession</i>	
What Our Organizations Can Do for You 265	
Acknowledgments	267
Appendix 1	270
<i>What Millennial Pastors Think about Succession</i>	
Appendix 2	286
<i>Frequently Asked Questions about Succession</i>	
Appendix 3	288
<i>A Successful Pastorate Doesn't Always Guarantee Good Pastoral Succession</i>	
Appendix 4	291
<i>Research for This Book</i>	
For Further Reading	293
Notes	297

Introduction to the New Edition

I HAVE KNOWN and respected William Vanderbloemen for years and have also known of the impact of this book. More and more churches are facing significant transitions in the next several years to the next decade, and *Next* quickly became a valuable tool for leadership teams, elders, planning teams, and church boards. What I did *not* know when *Next* was first released was how important a role the book would play in my life and ministry. I had no idea that Kenton Beshore and the leaders of Mariners Church were working through the book and reflecting on the principles within. I am so glad they did! I have benefited so much from the wisdom and intentionality of Kenton and other key leaders at Mariners.

We are now one year into the succession at Mariners. By God's grace, we have seen His goodness and provision. I am honored to pastor the church and honored to get to serve alongside Kenton in this season.

Eric Geiger, senior pastor, Mariners Church, Irvine, California

I N MY EARLY YEARS I watched three senior pastor transitions, and all three went badly. The churches prior to the transition had wonderful momentum. They were effectively changing and impacting their cities. If you looked at them before the transition, you would've believed that these churches were all headed up and to the right. But through the transition they each lost their momentum and ended up going through an identity

crisis. The churches didn't understand who they were. They didn't understand their story, the community story, and the story of the pastor they were hiring. The cost to the people, to the gospel, and to their city was incredible.

What was unfortunate is that there is great information out there to help churches. Sadly, they went through these transitions by themselves, not looking outside.

The book *Next*, written by William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird, was a valuable resource for us as we planned for transition/succession at Mariners; our whole leadership team read it. We even hired William Vanderbloemen as a consultant in our planning process. Since a church—hopefully—doesn't go through many transitions, it doesn't regularly work with the body of information related to transitions. It was refreshing to have experts who work in that field all the time.

The book *Next* was so valuable; it helped us as we went through the process. We gained great information and didn't feel like we were in the dark. We were able to identify clearly who we are and what kind of pastor we wanted. We worked hard through this process to become the most attractive church we could be to the next pastor, which also made us the church we wanted to be. We were prepared for the search process.

Every church eventually is going to go through succession and should be reading this book. It is what they need to become the church they want to be and to be ready in the moment of succession.

Kenton Beshore, pastor emeritus, Mariners Church, Irvine, California

Foreword to the Original Edition

WISDOM AROUND PASTORAL SUCCESSION is one of the great needs of the church today.

This is partly because the stress, challenge, and importance of leadership in churches has never been higher (they have become more complex and ever-changing places to lead, in increasingly more challenging contexts). It is also because churches often have fewer resources to help them. In the old days, churches could just call up the denominational pastor store and order a selection of fresh candidates to choose from. Now the pools in which to fish for a pastor have become smaller and harder to find. Should a church look inside its ranks or outside? For someone similar or different than the predecessor?

Churches and pastors often struggle with the issue of “Who comes next?” A spiritual aura can sometimes make open conversation more awkward for a church than for a corporation or a football team.

Sometimes pastors don’t choose transition; it chooses them: a forced resignation, a health problem or family crisis, or even death. I have noticed over the years that you can pretty accurately diagnose a pastor’s personality type by the metaphor he or she uses to describe an untimely death. I know of one pastor who would speak, with a steely courageous glint in his eye, of what might happen “if the plane went down.” I know of another who would talk about what the church might do “if I get run over by the ice-cream truck.” The ice-cream truck guy had a very different personality type (and body type, for that matter) than the “if the plane goes down” guy.

One of the great leaders and board members I have known, former Herman Miller CEO Max DePree, used to say that a board's single most important contribution was the selection of an organization's leader; in fact he said that this one task was actually more important than all the other tasks of the board put together.

So it's about time this book showed up.

In *Next*, William and Warren walk through what churches and pastors need to know about the hows and whens and whys of who's next. This is a book grounded in immense real-life experience. Scores of church stories are to be found here; the good, the bad, and the ugly. (Apart from its practical helpfulness, students of American church life will be interested in this book partly just for the stories.) It's also grounded in Scripture—the biblical writers dealt with issues of succession in spiritual leadership all the time: Moses to Joshua, Eli to his dysfunctional sons (family succession is always a challenge), Elijah to Elisha, as well as the jockeying of Jesus's disciples (“Can I sit on your right? Your left? Will it help if my mom asks?”).

So this is one book that will always need to inform practice. I have already sent a copy to several of the elders at my church. I'm not at the finish line yet, but I can see it from here, and it's never too soon to think about mastering the subtle art of torch-passing.

Besides, you never know when the plane might go down. And hit the ice-cream truck.

John Ortberg

Preface to the Expanded and Updated Edition

THE FIRST EDITION of this book took even the publisher by surprise. They had warned us, “This will be a micro-niche book. If we sell 2,500 copies for you, we’ll be thrilled.” William primed his mother to pre-order several copies to help boost our launch-day sales.

The publisher was wrong. Way wrong. The book took off, quickly going through several printings. The publisher literally couldn’t keep it in print, and for thirty-eight long and painful days Amazon announced that it was out of stock. This should have been enough to kill the momentum, yet it came back. *Christianity Today* built a cover story around it. Even mainstream media such as the *Washington Post* and *Forbes* gave it coverage.

Then recently the publisher came back to us, saying, “The book is still doing so well that we’d like you to do a new edition.”

Why? We had hit a nerve of something that was waiting to happen. Perhaps the most-quoted line from the book best explains the “aha” that readers are experiencing: “Every pastor is an interim pastor.” Actually, that phrase could be adapted to every leader: Every CEO is an interim CEO, every college president is an interim college president, and every denominational leader is an interim as well. Whatever hat you wear, it’s probably true for you as well.

In fact, succession conversations are becoming normal. They’re happening even in places where few would have predicted it. For instance, leaders of a prominent African-American annual pastors’ gathering recently

said to William, as they invited him to give a keynote talk on succession, “We couldn’t have had this public conversation five years ago. Frankly, we couldn’t have even imagined having it.”

And yet public conversations are now happening at all kinds of pastoral gatherings. If our initial dream for the book was for the conversation about succession to become legitimate, truly it’s no longer a forbidden or secret topic, and maybe the book has helped that along.

New Insights and New Layers of Succession Planning

But a new level of succession planning is also emerging. More than ever, people are trying to figure out not just what they can do to contribute to their inevitable hand-off being successful. They’re also asking what they should be doing now to prepare for when that day comes. William is surprised at the number of churches that have asked for a ten-year contract for an annual check-in to update and guide succession planning, not just for the lead person but at all senior levels.

Meanwhile, we’ve learned a lot in the last few years that can help people with these questions. Since the original edition came out, Vanderbloemen Search Group (now known simply as Vanderbloemen) has worked with hundreds of new successions—both churches and other nonprofits like schools, and even for-profits whose leaders want to build on Christ-centered values. We also surveyed hundreds of people whom Vanderbloemen has placed, asking their advice on succession. And Warren has conducted dozens more interviews on top of all that. In short, we

learned so much in the last five years that the new stories, new data, and new insights alone could create a new book.

We learned so much in the last five years that the new stories, new data, and new insights alone could create a new book.

Thus every paragraph of this book has been reviewed, new research and examples have been added, and new material has been incorporated based on new questions that have emerged as people study Scripture and best contemporary practices. You’ll find the changes in every chapter, plus a few totally new chapters. These include:

- new chapters on post-pastorate options and family succession
- new visual infographics
- new appendix on what millennial pastors think about pastoral succession
- new appendix on frequently asked questions
- new illustrations from recent successions in the news (some good, some bad!)

Why Not Prepare an “Heir and a Spare”?

Meanwhile we’ve continued to meet people who haven’t read anything about succession, nor found a coach or mentor to help them, nor even seen a healthy model of succession that could go well in their culture. A lot of these leaders are really smart, but they simply haven’t done a succession firsthand. For too many, their instincts of how to proceed have started them down a path that isn’t going to end well. One of King Solomon’s proverbs, so important that it appears twice, warns us: “There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death” (Prov. 14:12 and 16:25). It applies to succession planning as well.

As a result, we’ve tried to raise the awareness even more strongly in this expanded and updated edition that the most important action a leader or board can take is to create, cultivate, and coach leaders at every level. We want to challenge leaders not only to replace themselves but to proactively build a culture in which leaders at every level do so. This often-achievable dream can bring out insecurities and other fears. It can require hard work. But we’re all the more convinced that this is the New Testament’s teaching and model, even by our Lord himself—and we address both those concerns and biblical foundations in the chapters to come.

You Don’t Want Anyone to Marry Rachel but Wake Up to Discover Leah

Here’s a sobering, true story. It’s about one of the leading churches in my denomination (going forward, “I” and “my” refer to William and “we” refers to the two of us). This church had an amazing impact on its city for

the gospel. It had a prime location and great facility. It focused on bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ, with the lead pastor chairing the Billy Graham crusade for the city.

Then after this long-term, much-loved senior pastor stepped away, his successor led the church in a very different direction. Many of the members thought they had married Rachel only to discover that it was another person—to draw an analogy with Jacob’s experience with Leah (see Gen. 29). While doing much social good for the community, the new pastor led to a distinct change in theology and emphasis. Church leaders there today express embarrassment over the kind of evangelism that Billy Graham represented.

You want to get succession right, not just for yourself but for the legacy you leave behind. A succession can go south in many ways beyond theology in the example above. No one wants to read another headline of carnage and pain that translate into another black eye for Jesus. Our prayer and eager hope is that God will use this new edition to help people do succession well.

Before you jump into the main body of the book, do read the following Preface to the Original Edition, because it, too, will give you a helpful perspective on the book.

Preface to the Original Edition

EVERY PASTOR IS AN INTERIM PASTOR.

Few ministers consider that truth. Few are eager to admit that their time with their present church will one day end. But ultimately, all pastors are “interim” because the day when a successor takes over will come for everyone in ministry.

Planning for that day of succession may be the biggest leadership task a leader and church will ever face. It may also be the most important.

There’s an old saying: “Everyone wants to talk about succession . . . until it’s their own.” For way too long, the subject of succession has been avoided in the church, in pastors’ gatherings, and even in the pastor’s home. Those in leadership may not talk about it, but succession happens anyway.

Sadly, the story across thousands of churches is all too common: A wonderful pastor moves to another church or retires. The church takes a long time to find a replacement. The successor doesn’t last long. The church is off-kilter for a protracted time. Sometimes it never regains its former momentum and health. This happens in churches of all sizes.

We want this book to be part of a culture change—one that makes the story above less common, one that makes succession planning the norm in churches, and one that creates churches with long legacies of great leadership and service to God’s kingdom.

We are already seeing a new day dawn. Today, more than in any other era on record, pastors are anticipating their own succession. And they are not merely beginning to talk openly about it; their awareness of a future

transition is also shaping how they do ministry today. We believe their intentionality will increase the likelihood of their successors' success, even in traditions where pastors have little or no voice in what happens after they leave.

Today, more than in any other era on record, pastors are anticipating their own succession.

Preparing for the sun to rise on that day, we have examined almost two hundred pastoral succession case studies. We have studied where succession has worked, where it has failed, and what might happen to create smooth ministry hand-offs. We believe that what we have learned can help pastors and churches begin difficult but crucial conversations. And if those open discussions become the new standard, the church will be healthier and more effective.

Succession Planning Defined

We like how Dave Travis, former CEO of Leadership Network and now senior consultant with Generis, defines pastoral succession.¹ He teaches that it is *the intentional transfer of power, leadership, and authority from one primary leader to another*. Succession is when one senior leader intentionally transitions and hands over leadership to another. Succession planning is creating a plan for what will happen once you need a new leader—something all organizations face.

Succession planning can (and should) start with pastors early in their tenure at their church. Succession occurs repeatedly, whether it's a first pastorate or a tenth pastorate. The typical pastor will experience several ministry successions over a lifetime. Whether it's the pastor's own decision, the board's, or the bishop's (or equivalent), sooner or later all leaders move on. The same is true with leadership of other nonprofits.

In the corporate world, succession planning is now a requirement for nearly all publicly traded companies. Facing a season when no one knows who's in charge is just too risky. You need a plan. The church world needs to ask if its current lack of conversations about succession planning is wise—or whether our silence is instead setting up too many churches for long-term failure.

Scripture, our rule for faith and practice, offers no uniform blueprint, no cookie-cutter template, and no step-by-step approach that outlines a specific path for a seamless succession. As the variety of successions in Scripture illustrate, our universal recommendation about succession is that there is no universal recommendation. Healthy succession is much more art than science. The plan and details must be tailored to each situation. It is also a deeply spiritual process that calls for prayer and recognition of God's leading.

However, we do see a healthy trend growing in more churches where people, whether the lead pastor or others on the staff or board, are openly asking, "How do we transition well?" They want to know what they should do now to lay the foundation for a healthy succession, whether it should occur unexpectedly tomorrow or it's not likely for decades to come.

This book identifies much of the conventional wisdom voiced in various quarters, but it also hopes to challenge every "rule" you've heard. We want to help you discern the pros and cons for each rule and whether your situation warrants being an exception. We tell dozens of actual stories, purposely showing how one pastor went one way and another pastor went a different way. We will map out the options, but you will need to prayerfully sort through them.

Pastoral succession is the intentional transfer of power, leadership, and authority from one primary leader to another.

The Conversation Is Starting Sooner and Younger

Rex Keener had a dream in his early years as founding pastor of Grace Fellowship Church. He announced the dream to the congregation: "I'd love to be the pastor here for forty years."

The year 2013 marked Rex's twentieth anniversary at the church, which today draws more than 3,000 people weekly across four campuses in greater Albany, New York. At age fifty-three, Rex could have followed the path of a successful marketplace CEO who begins creating company-funded perks to make life more comfortable for himself and his family. Or he could have made the church increasingly about him, allowing highway billboards

or large portraits inside the church building to depict his image, all as a strategy to build the future on the goodwill that his leadership amassed over the church's first two decades.

Instead, Rex decided to look way down the road.

"Crossing the halfway mark of forty potential years here, I'm already aware that the single most important thing I'll do is pass the baton well," he says. "I am becoming more diligent to train leaders in a deeper way than ever before."

In West Palm Beach, Florida, thirty-four-year-old Kerwin Santiago recently inherited the senior leadership role for Tabernaculo Internacional Church from his father, who had been the longtime senior pastor. His dad's ministry, done entirely in Spanish, includes an ongoing radio, television, and overseas evangelism ministry. Kerwin, who is very comfortable in both languages, continues to hold worship in Spanish, but the children's and youth ministries are in English.

One day Kerwin realized that he was on a collision course with the future. As the church's children become youth and young adults, they want a church that feels Hispanic but continues to speak in English, including in the worship services. Meanwhile, the older core of the church, which is currently the financial base for both the church and the overseas media ministry, is a first-generation demographic that needs ministry in Spanish.

Kerwin began to think of succession as more than going from past to present. It involves more than receiving and continuing to honor the ministry of his father and predecessor. He also needs to anticipate and build for the future.

"I've been focused on trying to keep up all that my dad left me," he said. "But we have to figure out more than how to continue being a church to the Spanish-speaking nations. We have to become a church for this local community as well." And that community both is Hispanic and prefers English. To that end, Kerwin, in dialogue with his father, is building a team of leaders who are his age and younger, aware that one day he will pass the leadership baton to them. He wants to be able to bless them so that they, too, can transition the church as needed to a new generation and an ever-changing neighborhood.²

Don't Confuse Succession with Retirement

Do you remember the whole world watching as Pope Benedict XVI made the unprecedented decision to transition to pope emeritus? *Christianity Today* used the event to ask Protestants a pointed question in an article titled: “The Pope Retired. Should Your Pastor?”³

According to the article, most pastors are not facing the reality that one day they will need to step down and retire. A study of one denomination, for example, found that only 1 out of every 4 pastors (25%) has plans for full retirement⁴ and another 1 in 4 (27%) said they didn’t plan to retire at all.⁵ Even when pastors do want to retire—let alone those who are forced to retire because of health issues—too many lack a financial plan to make retirement economically viable.

So if pastors facing retirement have a hard enough time addressing retirement issues, it is easy to understand why succession planning gets even less attention. But equating succession planning with retirement planning is a major error in perception. Pastoral succession is not primarily about retirement. Retirement is often only a final step in a series of pastoral successions. And in a few cases, if no one has planned for the unexpected, a leader’s abrupt or untimely death leaves a congregation in unnecessary pain, entering an era of chaos.

Pastoral succession is not primarily about retirement. Retirement is often only a final step in a series of pastoral successions.

Our Research and Experience

We wrote *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works* to offer a unique, hope-filled tool for pastors and church boards as they face crucial decisions regarding succession. As our “Research for This Book” section (appendix 4) explains in more detail, we examined almost two hundred case studies of high-visibility successions, including some of the best and the worst. We conducted more than fifty extended interviews—many onsite in the pastor’s office. We read numerous books, research reports, and doctoral dissertations on the subject, and we tracked dozens of newspaper stories and articles that chronicled a senior pastor transition.

Through Vanderbloemen, William and his team have overseen 1,500 staffing and succession assignments for churches and faith-based organizations to date (see “What Our Organizations Can Do for You” on pages 265–66). Through his firm’s work in helping churches find their key leaders, William has a breadth of experience with succession planning and has witnessed firsthand the best practices being used today.

Through Leadership Network (and now ECFA, Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability), Warren has conducted dozens of lengthy interviews with outgoing and succeeding pastors. He has been part of several focus groups with pastors at various points in the succession process, consulting with several church leadership teams before, during, and after their pastoral transition. He has participated in three online video conferences in which some or all of the sessions were on pastoral succession, many of which he moderated.

These rich contexts allow us to recount many real-life stories from successions, some that went well and some that went awry.

Who Is This Book For?

We’re writing primarily to pastors. We suspect the most eager readers will be those who know they will be leaving their churches in the near future and want to do everything possible to be part of a healthy transition.

But we hope a much wider audience hears our message. We are intentionally writing to the far larger group of pastors not actively in a succession countdown, who are happily serving their church. In fact, perhaps you and the church you serve couldn’t be in a better season. We want to help you shape the culture of your church now so that your eventual succession will be as seamless as possible for the ongoing momentum and future health of your congregation.

We want to help you shape the culture of your church now so that your eventual succession will be as seamless as possible.

We’re also writing to church boards and other key leaders as you look over the shoulder of your pastor. We’re aware that not only do you think about your pastor’s eventual succession but you

will likely be part of the process. We want to give you ideas, examples, case studies, and other wisdom in how to prepare.

We're writing as well to future pastors in training and to the seminary professors who train them. Succession planning is an essential part of leadership development, and our hope is that you'll represent a new generation that talks openly about forming the kind of leadership culture designed to create an optimal succession.

This book, therefore, addresses the important issues up until the time the church is actually without a pastor. As a result, we are not primarily writing on how to establish a pastor search committee. Many excellent books exist with that focus, including William's book *Search: The Pastoral Committee Handbook*.⁶

Does the size or setting of your church matter for how helpful this book will be? We have studied churches of all sizes. Most of the patterns and lessons we have gleaned from the churches profiled in this book will transfer well to churches of any size.

Most of the patterns and lessons we have gleaned from the churches profiled in this book will transfer well to churches of any size.

Finally, we're writing to leaders of Christ-centered nonprofits and other Christian-owned businesses, knowing that many of the principles of this book easily apply to your settings as you, too, will one day need to experience succession.

Overview of the Book

After reading *Next*, senior leaders will have the tools needed to anticipate succession and begin preparing their churches for the next generation of leadership. The book is framed in three parts.

The first part, “Why Succession Planning Can’t Wait,” vividly depicts present reality. It argues that every pastor and church should develop a succession plan now.

The second part, “Be the Exception,” walks you through each of the issues pastors and leadership boards need to address in mapping out a succession plan.

The third part, “Transition Well, Finish Strong,” walks pastors and churches through the actual transition, offering hope and guidance toward success. Almost every chapter tells actual stories from start to finish. Whenever possible, we sought permission and editorial help from the people being featured.

Rather than offer you a one-size-fits-all approach with a singular answer for how to achieve success, we’ve put forth a study of key issues and have tried to raise the questions to ask and steps to take as you face the issue of succession. Each chapter ends with Next Steps—one set of discussion questions and/or suggested action steps for the senior pastor and one set for a church board or equivalent. Our goal is to touch on the right dynamics and help you raise the right questions as a result.

Our Hope and Prayer

An honest and productive conversation by pastors and leaders about what will happen in their church’s future has been missing for too long. We believe the day will come when pastors can readily and confidently say, “No matter how long I stay at this church, I am just an interim pastor. So I have done everything possible to lay a solid foundation for what will happen once my time here is done.”

“No matter how long I stay at this church, I have done everything possible to lay a solid foundation for what will happen once my time here is done.”

We hope you’ll make that statement no matter how long you’ve been at the church and whether you’re anticipating a move just around the corner or not for years to come. The key is that you realize that what you do now is important to that succession day.

So turn the page and get started developing your own and your church’s succession plans. By starting now, you can set up yourself, your church, and your community for long-term success. Join us and others in reversing the unhealthy pattern of failed successions in the church and revolutionizing the way we model the kingdom of God inside our own church staff.

PART 1

Why Succession Planning Can't Wait

1

Why Every Leader Needs This Book

Top Reasons You and Your Ministry Should Start Planning
for Succession Right Now

Wisdom consists of the anticipation of consequences.

Norman Cousins

THINKING ABOUT WHAT'S NEXT before they have to—that's what marks the greatest leaders, business people, athletes, and politicians of the world. It's also a common trait of exceptionally wise pastors. What's next for you? Sooner or later, unless Jesus returns during your lifetime, there will be a leadership baton pass. Thinking about that transition ahead of time might make all the difference in your and your church's or ministry's legacy.

There's an old saying the US Marine Corps used during battle: "If you're early, you're on time. If you're on time, you're late. If you're late, you're dead."

The same can be said for succession planning. The earlier you start planning, the better. In fact, we believe no date is too early to begin planning. Wait too long, and you may find that you're late—or metaphorically dead.

In that spirit, you should *avoid* this book if:

- You are confident you can remain as pastor of your church until Jesus returns.
- You can avoid bodily death.
- You can stay relevant to a changing culture for the next several decades.
- You are planning on shutting down your church.
- You already have an outstanding, bulletproof succession plan and don't need to learn anything from hundreds of case studies.

The sobering reality is that the majority of pastors do not have a plan for the inevitable moment when they leave their current church (as the figure below affirms). We believe they should. Likewise, the majority of churches do not have a plan for the inevitable moment when their current pastor leaves. We believe they should as well.

This book argues that the best time to begin thinking about pastoral succession is *now*. Every pastor—young and old, new or long tenured—will end up better by starting *today* with succession preparations.

The purpose of this book is for pastors and boards to have a resource that enables them to ask the questions necessary to create a succession plan. We are also convinced this is something any pastor and leadership team in any church can do at some level—regardless of age, church size, or denomination/tradition. Some pastors actually select their successor, but most everyone can build the kind of environment that will lead to the smoothest possible succession when the time comes.

That's a different perspective from much of the advice you'll hear out there. It may be different than what you want to believe, and perhaps you

Most Need a Succession Plan

84%



The number of churches that lack a written emergency succession plan for the senior leader.

Source: Vanderbloemen Client Survey 2019, N=111

feel you can put off the task for tomorrow. In reality, succession is more urgent than you think and probably more important than you have imagined.

Certainly, these opening words aren't for churches alone. Consider a thriving Youth for Christ regional ministry that grew for two decades, building a full-time staff of twelve that spanned two states. Then the leader suddenly had a heart attack and died—with no succession plan in place. In a twenty-minute meeting, the board named the longest-term senior staffer as the new area leader. Sadly, he was a great right-hand assistant, but he had no abilities to cast vision, cultivate donors, or lead a team. Within two years the ministry in that area had all but shut down. How different could the future have been if only that initial leader and his board had planned for a healthy transition?

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Current Models Are All Over the Map

While succession is uniformly important and urgent, there is no uniform approach that works for all churches. Consider the breadth of the spectrum among some of these pacesetting churches.

- Charles “Chuck” Swindoll, senior pastor at Stonebriar Community Church and popular author, has said publicly that “pastors don’t retire,” and he hopes to preach until he dies.¹ Many other high-visibility pastors have made similar statements, shaping today’s culture of succession. For churches (and businesses) more people in their seventies and eighties are at the helm than at any time in history—a simple extension of people living longer and healthier.
- Leith Anderson, who was president of the National Association of Evangelicals for thirteen years and senior pastor at Wooddale Church in greater Minneapolis for thirty-four years, started planning his succession early in his ministry. When he stepped down from the church, he also stepped away from having anything to do with the succession process, other than affirming the idea of

an intentional interim of up to two years before his successor was named.² “I’ve always encouraged long-term pastors to step away from influence in their congregations with trust in God and confidence in the church leadership and new pastor to effectively minister to the next generation,” he said.³ Indeed, his successor was announced at the sixteen-month mark and installed at the twenty-month mark.

- When the church with the world’s largest attendance at the time announced the name of its new senior pastor, one of the most surprised people to learn about it was the new pastor himself.

Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, was founded in 1958 by David Yonggi Cho. As he announced his retirement, an extensive search was begun for a successor. Young Hoon Lee and his family had joined Yoido in 1964 when Lee was still in elementary school. After graduating from college and seminary, in 1982 he joined the staff, becoming one of Yoido’s five-hundred-plus pastors. Then he moved on to pastor other churches. He was in Los Angeles pastoring a Yoido-affiliated church when he received a phone call to announce that he had been selected. “I didn’t even know I was being considered,” he said.⁴

Likewise, smaller churches lack a consistent model for dealing with succession, as these emails or conversations represent:

- “I recently joined a church as an associate vicar [pastor] with the understanding that I will succeed the vicar [senior pastor] when he retires next year. What should I do to help make it a good transition?”
- “Our pastor has served here faithfully for twenty-seven years. Her first decade was rough, but her second decade became our church’s greatest growth era. Now in the last seven to eight years we’ve been declining in attendance, the congregation is aging, facility repairs are demanding a bigger slice of our dwindling finances, and the neighborhood is changing. She doesn’t give any hint of transitioning. How do we honor her but also begin this important conversation?”

- “I was brought into the church as a potential successor to the senior pastor, who had a plan in motion to become an urban church planter. After spending years on a leadership development track, I was told that the senior pastor had decided not to move on. Now what do I do? Is this normal in churches?”
- “We’re in shock. A few months ago our pastor abruptly resigned and moved away, citing vague ‘personal reasons.’ Every week seems to turn up new evidence of a mess, including likely misuse of church funds. Trust and morale in the church have plummeted. Our denomination is helping, but can you help us as well?”
- “Our long-term pastor recently asked the board what it might look like if he resigned from the church and we sent him as an overseas missionary through an organization our church has long supported. Both he and we want to do a smooth hand-off, but we don’t know where to begin.”

For all the talk in churches about vision, there is an unmistakable blind spot in churches large and small: succession isn’t being discussed enough, and when it is, church leaders often lack wisdom in identifying the questions to ask or in what order to tackle them. This book seeks to be a part of the solution to that blind spot. While we agree that no two successions are identical, we have identified several common topics that must be worked through in most successions, backed by data we’ve uncovered.

Succession Is Inevitable

Consider these numbers about pastoral succession among US Protestants:

- There are now more full-time senior pastors who are over the age of sixty-five than under the age of forty.⁵
- The average senior pastor plans to retire from full-time active ministry at age sixty-five.⁶
- On average, those who are currently senior pastors have served eight years thus far in their present position, an average tenure that has inched upward over the years.⁷

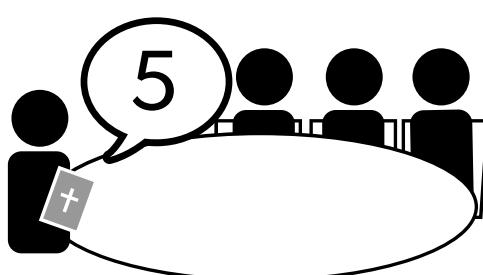
- The average senior pastor is eighteen years into his or her career as a minister, so with the average age of senior pastors at fifty-five (or so) and the expected retirement being sixty-five or so for clergy, then one would expect the average clergy career to be roughly thirty years long.⁸ This timeline suggests that the typical pastor faces succession multiple times during a ministry career.
- These numbers also suggest that in any given year, roughly thirty thousand of America's Protestant pastors are in transition.
- Senior pastors state a wide variety of reasons for moving to another church, such as wanting to serve in a different community (27%) and moving to a higher position (20%).⁹ Long gone is the standard practice of pastoring one church for life until retirement.
- Among senior pastors of megachurches (weekly worship attendance of 2,000 or more adults, youth, and children), according to Leadership Network research, 1 in 5 (22%) are founders and 4 in 5 (78%) are successors. Founders have served on average nineteen years to date and are age fifty-three; successors have served fourteen years to date and are age fifty-two.¹⁰

How Far Ahead Senior Pastors Begin Retirement Conversations

**5
years**

Five years before retirement is when the typical senior pastor plans to begin the succession conversation.

Source: Vanderbloemen Client Survey 2019, N=42



The message behind these facts is clear: succession is an inevitable issue for pastors and churches. The time to face that reality and to plan for it is now. Interestingly, for those pastors anticipating succession through retirement, we asked how far ahead they plan to begin the conversation, and the average was five years (see the figure on the previous page). Perhaps the conversation will begin privately, such as with a spouse or best friend, and gradually expand into larger circles.

God Is Interested in Succession

The most important news about succession is that God knows how to make leadership transfers go well. God seems to be very active in preparing leaders and churches for the inevitabilities of pastoral transition, even before successors realize they are being prepared for a transition. Again, successions are inevitable; when we read “Moses my servant is dead” (Josh. 1:2), we also see the reality that the transition had started years before as God prepared Joshua. The church is God’s bride. Perfecting her is God’s primary goal, and a big part of that perfection is ensuring seamless, fruitful leadership transitions.

Moses actually had a direct hand in those preparations. As his tenure was drawing to a close, Moses cried out to God, “May the LORD, the God who gives breath to all living things, appoint someone over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD’s people will not be like sheep without a shepherd” (Num. 27:16–17).

Luke Barnett started his first pastorate at age twenty-six. It was a rough but wild and wonderful ride. After three years, he accepted a call from another church. That pastorate, too, was full of both challenges and growth. Then the church he grew up in called him to eventually succeed his father, Tommy Barnett. The formal transition was in 2012 when Tommy Barnett was seventy-four and Luke was forty-two.

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Now, several years into leading Phoenix First Assembly of God (worship attendance of 7,000), Luke realizes that God's hand was preparing him. "The first pastor I followed had been there forty-seven years and the second pastor, thirty-seven years," he said. "Looking back, I see how God prepared me through following long-tenured pastors. Those were great days when God was forming me, preparing my wife and me for the ultimate transition here."

The elder board affirms similar evidences of God's hand in their own spiritual preparation. The specific date for Tommy Barnett to be succeeded had been triggered by a health issue. He needed surgery to repair a heart valve, with an anticipated recovery time of eight months. Before taking this leave of absence, Tommy told the elder board that he wanted Luke to be in charge of the overall ministry, which both the board and the Assemblies of God district leadership affirmed.

They also developed a transition plan. As Luke described it, "There's a critical moment for relay races when both runners are holding on to the baton. There was an eight-month period when we both held it, before he fully let go. We wanted people to look back and say, 'We didn't know there was a transition.' We wanted it to be seamless."

About four months into the transition, one of the elder board meetings became very emotional as the elders voiced their earlier fears when they wondered how anyone could follow Tommy's thirty-three years as senior pastor of Phoenix First. "Only God could give us a glimpse of what could happen if you were not at the helm here," one of the elders said to Tommy with gratitude. A year later, Luke and his teaching team began to

preach all four services each weekend. Tommy, busy preaching all over, began preaching at the church around three times a year. "Whenever he comes, it's a big celebration," Luke said. "We all see God's hand at work."¹¹

The right person to succeed is often the one who has been prepared elsewhere.

One trend we've noticed is that the right person to succeed is often the one who has been prepared elsewhere. In other words, the best job you could possibly undertake is a job you never could have undertaken had you not done everything leading up to now.

God Is Never Caught by Surprise (Even If We Are)

While this book gives you a glimpse into the wide variety of succession styles across scores of churches of all sizes and equips you with a myriad of good ideas and tools, the foundational theology of this book is that God is never caught by surprise. If you’re the pastor, God is preparing you—for your arrival at a church, for your departure, and for your successor. After all, every pastor is an interim pastor of some sort.

If you are a church board member, on a pastor search team, or in a denominational role of finding and/or appointing pastors, the message applies as well: you are not alone. You have invitations throughout Scripture to call upon God for your every need. You also have the reminder of God’s special love for his church and of his promised provision for it. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). God has also affirmed that he will be glorified through the church. “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory *in the church* and in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:20–21, emphasis added).

The foundational theology of this book is that God is never caught by surprise. After all, every pastor is an interim pastor of some sort.

If your pastoral search comes at a time when things have fallen apart and you don’t know what to do, remember that “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). God’s church depends far more on the Great Shepherd than the human undershepherd (1 Pet. 5:1–4). Any church’s future depends ultimately on God far more than the coming and going of human leadership.

The Bible Is Full of Succession Stories

Succession isn’t just an organizational issue; it’s also a spiritual one. It’s not just a topic found on church board meeting agendas. Scripture contains a wealth of guidance and insight, all affirming the importance of leadership development, especially for the next generation.

Just as we have found in our case studies, Scripture illustrates that there is no singular model or plan to create a smooth succession. Even in the great transitions in the Bible, hand-offs take place in a variety of ways.

- Moses, mentioned earlier in this chapter, leads until his death, but before then he spends many years training and grooming Joshua—who is not one of his sons or nephews.
- Aaron's third-born son, Eleazar, rather than his firstborn son, becomes Aaron's successor (Num. 20:25–29).
- Saul wants his son Jonathan to succeed him but has to learn that God wants David, an outsider (1 Sam. 23:16–17).
- Elijah apprentices Elisha, but before their leadership transition, God has made it clear that Elisha is to be the successor—and in the transition, Elisha asks for and receives a double portion of the anointing that was on his mentor (2 Kings 2:9).
- Barnabas discipiles Paul (Acts 9:27; 11:22–30), but over time the roles reverse and Paul becomes the lead player (e.g., Acts 12:25–13:7; 13:42–14:3; 14:14, 23; 15:2).
- Jesus spends his final days on earth preparing others to carry on the mission he has begun (John 21). Jesus hands off the church to his disciples, a hand-off he's openly spoken about, prepared for, trained them for, and empowered them to do. By both word and deed, Jesus demonstrates that success in ministry is defined by successors.

Preparing Successors Is Key—and Biblical

Throughout the Bible the message about succession is consistent: effective leaders plan ahead for the time when they can no longer lead, and they prayerfully prepare for that day.

The Bible also provides many examples of leaders training their successors, including our Lord himself. The approach of Jesus was to call the apostles to be in relationship *with him* (Mark 3:13–14), as Robert Coleman points out in his marvelous book *The Master Plan of Evangelism*.¹² Over time Jesus gave them jobs and supervised their work (e.g., Mark 3:9;

6:35–44; John 4:1–2); later, he sent them out on preaching missions and then debriefed them (e.g., Luke 9:1–6, 10). Jesus clearly created apprenticeship roles with increasing responsibilities over time.

The apostles also followed that model by preparing their own successors. Paul discipled a number of important leaders for the early church, but his relationship with Timothy is a particularly clear example of leadership development principles. He identified Timothy as a potential leader, an identification confirmed by the Holy Spirit (1 Tim. 1:18); he traveled with Timothy, taught him, and modeled good leadership; he sent Timothy out on a variety of assignments; and he eventually entrusted to Timothy’s leadership the very important church in Ephesus.

Jesus clearly created apprenticeship roles with increasing responsibilities over time.

Timothy seemed to have been apprehensive about his job (e.g., 2 Tim. 1:7). But Paul encouraged him in his work and laid out the pattern for developing future leaders: “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:1–2 ESV). Four generations of passing the leadership baton are evident in that verse—as Paul has equipped Timothy, so now Timothy should train others, who in turn will train others.¹³

Leaders understand that there is no success without a successor. No one wins when transitions don’t go well.

Leaders understand that there is no success without a successor.

Human Planning Does Not Remove God’s Role in Succession Planning

People sometimes ask if creating a succession plan takes God out of the equation. Does the use of intentional succession plans, search firms, or even books like this put too much emphasis on human mechanism and not enough on the Holy Spirit?

Our sense is that God does use people and systems in conjunction with the Holy Spirit to help build leadership teams in the church.

Consider Jesse. He lined up all his grown sons for the prophet Samuel to choose a new king, but Samuel asked for the boy David, who was still out in the fields. In other words, Jesse planned well, doing everything that made the best sense to him. He brought in all his strong sons, and knowing that someone needed to watch the sheep that day, left the runt of the litter to watch the sheep. Most of us also overlook potential options, but God used Samuel to see what Jesse couldn't see on his own. Granted, Samuel was a prophet of God (and we are not). But one of the key dynamics in using a plan, a denominational process, a search firm, or even this book is that you gain a “third set of eyes” looking at your situation with objectivity, experience, and data to help you.

Most of us know how to line up succession candidates, but we’re not as skilled at predicting whom the Holy Spirit will select. This is where prayer and godly counsel are essential. If we miss someone despite our best efforts to identify the right choice, the Spirit will still show us, just as the Spirit worked through the prophet Samuel to select David (1 Sam. 16:11–13).

The selection of David was not the only way God worked through the prophet Samuel in modeling succession. In his role as a prophet, Samuel provided for succession, but not through his sons. Rather, he apparently developed a school of prophets (1 Sam. 10:5–13; 19:18–24), which established a group known as “the sons of the prophets” that lasted until Israel’s Northern and Southern Kingdoms were destroyed. This helped build a succession pattern into the culture of Israel.

Pastors Are Reluctant to Plan (but Can’t Afford to Make Excuses)

It seems odd that so many pastors give strong leadership in many strategic areas but stop leading when it comes to succession issues. Why? We think it’s because there are so few models. It’s just not the norm—yet! Pastors and church leadership teams simply don’t think that way, though a few are beginning to.

The authors of *The Elephant in the Boardroom*, an excellent book with the intriguing subtitle of *Speaking the Unspoken about Pastoral Transitions*, suggest additional reasons: fear and low self-confidence. They reason: