

This book not only provides churches with a wise process for a pastoral transition; it actually worked. As the candidate who worked through this transition plan, I can attest to the wisdom found in this book.

JOSHUA GREINER, pastor of Berean Baptist Church and successor to the author

We hired Bill while I was serving as deacon chairman of Berean Baptist in 2009. We needed an experienced and well grounded, servant of God and found Bill to be a perfect fit for our church. He is highly educated in God's Word, a good public speaker, and experienced in church functionality. He quickly learned our culture and won the hearts of our people. He is a deliberate and practical thinker. I found *Shepherd Change* to be a prime example of Bill's practical thinking style and his faith in God's guidance.

TIMOTHY MORSCHECK, served as a deacon of Berean Baptist Church

Shepherd Change is a straightforward guide to an unwieldy topic and is a critical read for any pastor or leader as they near a transition. Moreover, this book is eye-opening for any church member who seeks to better understand how to care for their outgoing pastor. The practical wisdom gleaned from this resource will help every humble servant-leader finish well.

SAMUEL R. GILBERTSON, served as a deacon of Berean Baptist Church

Bill speaks from a personal life of godly fidelity and pastoral genuineness. His steadiness, wisdom and example in pastoring Berean Baptist Church was truly a blessing. He initiated, engaged and completed his pastoral transition with the same godly wisdom shown throughout his

ministry. He is a pastor's pastor. He shares, not from textbook learning, but from real-life experience. Reading this book on ministry transition will be time well spent gaining wisdom for choices to be made.

STEVE NICHOLS, served as associate pastor of Berean Baptist Church

Shepherd Change thoughtfully and carefully outlines procedures for churches considering a transition to a new lead pastor. There is much to learn here, but what I really appreciated from the book was reading about his own thoughts and hearing his heart for his wife, his staff, his congregation, as well as his successor as he moved through the process, wanting to honor God above all in this new phase in his life and ministry...a book well worth reading.

LYNN FORD, served as office manager of Berean Baptist Church

I will never forget when my friend and ministry colleague, Bill Abernathy, asked if I would like to spend a weekend with his church's leadership team to help lead them in strategic planning. The purpose was to discuss his ministry sabbatical and, at that point, the theoretical prospect of his future ministry transition. He framed the proposed weekend as an opportunity to answer the question, "What happens if our pastor gets hit by a bus?" He certainly captured my attention as well as those involved in the early stages of the formative plan that is now detailed in *Shepherd Change*. This book is a thorough and practical guide for pastors and ministry leadership teams as they prayerfully anticipate and prepare for the inevitable pastoral transition. Many of us have enjoyed the privilege of observing first-hand Bill's proven and effective pastoral shepherding. His insights serve as a roadmap and

provide encouragement to those who follow the wise counsel provided in this resource.

KEN FLOYD, Former Executive Ministry Director,
Bridge Fellowship

Shepherd Change is an invaluable guide for churches navigating one of their most significant transitions: the changing of senior or lead pastor. With wisdom born from years of experience, Bill lays out traditional strategies and innovative alternatives, ensuring every church navigates the path for its unique journey. His insights are not just practical but deeply thoughtful, offering seasoned guidance that equips leaders, congregations, and successors for a smooth and spiritually grounded transition. Whether your church is preparing for change or simply planning ahead, this book is a must-read resource for ensuring a thriving future. Highly recommended!

JONATHAN MCGINNIS, Executive Director, Tri-M Global

Shepherd Change

SHEPHERD CHANGE

*Strategies for Navigating
Pastoral Transitions*

BILL ABERNATHY

Regular Baptist Press
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“I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service” (1 Timothy 1:12). It was not my intent to be a pastor, but Jesus called, equipped, and sustained me. All the glory goes to Him.

My beautiful bride, Peggy, has stood by me in blessed and hard times. I cannot imagine doing ministry without her.

Fellow pastors have served shoulder to shoulder with me in ministry.

Two precious churches have loved, encouraged, challenged, and followed me. Much of what I know I learned as we grew together. I have had the joy of serving those churches with other faithful shepherds and have been enriched by amazing leaders in both the churches God assigned to me.

To all of these and a host of others who have influenced my life, thank you!

And thank you, reader, for obtaining this book. My prayer as I researched and wrote was that God would use this in my local church and across His Church for His glory.

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INTRODUCTION

“Every pastor is an interim pastor.” This assertion by William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird in their seminal book *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works*¹ confronts pastors with the reality that, unless Jesus returns soon or their churches die, an end will come to their time serving their churches and someone else will carry on the ministry. Every church will experience a pastoral transition, often several times.

The point is not that a pastor should always have one foot out the door or that churches should expect their pastor to leave at any moment; the point is that every pastor and every church should be prepared for the day when a pastoral transition occurs. Too often churches and pastors give little or no forethought to this.

“A pastoral departure is treated like a terminal diagnosis; just as no one plans for cancer, no one plans for a leadership transition either. Once the leader has moved, grief sets in. . . . The congregation is wounded in all the ways an individual is wounded by personal loss, and it responds in a similar pattern. Denial, anger, depression, guilt, bargaining, and

finally acceptance are the stages of grief played out in the congregation as members experience loss.”²

There is a better way.

Careful thinking about transitions aligns with a Biblical approach to pastoral ministry. Every pastor-shepherd is simply a steward of the flock entrusted to him by the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:1–4). The pastor is not to build a personal following or his own kingdom but to faithfully point to the Savior and prepare the church to move forward with or without him. Business consultant and author Jim Collins, speaking to a group of pastors, noted, “Your church cannot be great if it cannot be great without you.”³ The church can be great only when it is founded on Christ, not a pastor.

Every pastor’s goal should be that the church, focused and founded on Jesus Christ, follows Him and grows into what He desires. Paul modeled this for us when he insisted, “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:5–7).

John Maxwell writes, “Achievement comes to someone when he is able to do great things for himself. Success comes when he empowers followers to do great things with him. Significance comes when he develops leaders to do great things for him. But a legacy is created only when a person puts his organization into a position to do great things without him.”⁴

How should pastors and churches prepare for pastoral transitions? Is it possible to prepare without disrupting

the church's life and ministry? Can transitions take place in such a way that God is glorified through the process and its results?

While this book largely addresses the transition as a pastor moves into retirement or a nonchurch ministry, the principles are applicable more widely. Pastors and churches need to intentionally develop leaders, aiming to prepare the next pastor the church will need.

MY STORY

As I closed in on forty years of pastoral ministry, having served in two congregations, and as my sixty-fifth birthday loomed on the horizon, I knew it was time to begin the transition conversation. It was not yet time for me to step aside, and I was not ready to cease ministry, but I sensed the day was coming when the church and I both needed a transition.

I had conversations about it with the Lord and with my wife. Both are critical. A transition must happen in the Lord's time and in His way, and I knew my wife needed to be on board before I discussed the possibility with others. I also knew that I could not afford to underestimate the impact a transition would have on her—both positive and negative.

As my wife and I became convinced that my transition needed to take place in the next three to five years, I sought counsel from men I respected and who were a little further down the road than I was. Some had already stepped away from pastoral ministry. Listening to their stories and

gleaning from them about what went well and what did not go well was invaluable.

I struggled with the concern that transition conversations could make me a lame duck. By God's grace, they did not. However, pastors do need to be aware of their relationships with people in their churches and approach the conversation prayerfully and wisely.

CHAPTER 1

THE DISCUSSION WE ARE RELUCTANT TO HAVE . . . BUT MUST HAVE

Pastoral transitions are often the elephant in the room. Everyone knows they will come, but no one wants to talk about them. Broaching the subject may be uncomfortable and may stretch our faith, but it is critical.

When Vanderbloemen and Bird wrote the first edition of *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works* in 2014, churches and pastors were not discussing transitions. In the years since, current realities, and perhaps the book itself, have caused

this subject to be out in the open. The bibliography at the end of this book gives a sense of the depth of this discussion.

WHY ARE WE RELUCTANT TO TALK ABOUT TRANSITIONS?

Church boards¹ are reluctant to discuss pastoral transitions because they don't want to be seen as pushing the pastor out the door, and if the pastor's relationship with other leaders in the church is healthy, the thought of him leaving brings grief. It also means a pastoral search must happen, and boards may be disinclined to begin that potentially exhausting process.

Churches are reluctant to discuss pastoral transitions because the pastor is well loved, so they do not want him to leave. They are also familiar with his leadership style, comfortable with his preaching and teaching, and know how they fit with his and the church's ministry. One author equates a pastor leaving to pulling a piece of fruit from the middle of a fruit bowl, causing every other piece of fruit to shift position.² Church members would rather avoid upsetting the status quo, thus, resisting change.

Warren Wiersbe agrees: "The people we serve are prone to resist change and will plead with us to stay on the job. They do this not necessarily because of their great love for us or our great ministry to them but because they don't want to go through the hassle of looking for a replacement. . . . 'Don't rock the boat!' is the unofficial motto of many ministries that have long since lost both their compass and their rudder and are gradually sinking in a sea of complacent tranquility."³

Pastors are reluctant to discuss pastoral transitions because they are concerned that such a discussion will cause people to think they are preparing to leave immediately or that it will make them a lame duck long before they depart. Other pastors fear that leaders and people will be excited about the thought of them leaving and will be ready for it to happen as soon as possible.

Perhaps the pastor does not want to leave the church floundering, especially a small church unable to call an assistant pastor who could be trained for the lead pastor role. Financially, it may not seem feasible for the church to have an overlapping time of paying two lead pastors, so he stays. These are real and proper concerns but can be addressed with careful thought and long-term planning. Chapter 8 deals with these in more depth.

Pastors may also be reluctant to discuss pastoral transitions because so much of their identity is wrapped up in the ministry. Closely tied to this mindset is the normal (but pride-rooted) thought, “What if they like the new guy better than me?” These human struggles must be overcome by rooting our identity in who we are in Christ. That identity transcends any ministry role and continues when a role ends.

The old (erroneous) slogan “I’d rather burn out than rust out” also contributes to pastors’ reluctance to talk about transitions. Some pastors would rather die in the pulpit, ministering to the end, but is that best for churches? While no Christian should ever retire from serving the Lord, times of vocational ministry will end.

Additionally, some pastors are unable to discontinue ministry because they are not financially ready for retirement.

Low salaries and inadequate retirement planning by churches and pastors are unfortunate realities. Churches need to think seriously about how they are helping pastors of all ages prepare for retirement.

In a large church, the current and future roles of other pastoral staff members also enter into the reluctance of lead pastors to think about transitions. Vanderbloemen and Bird relate that this issue “is almost always a tricky part of the succession question.”⁴ Barna says, “Church staff are the most likely to face confusion during times of transition.”⁵ The pastor must have honest, careful, and clear communication with the staff throughout the process.

A more troubling scenario is when a pastor has reached a point in his life and ministry when he should retire, both for his own good and that of the church, but he continues serving as the pastor. His energy and vision for the church are waning and the church is stagnating, but he does not step aside. As a retired pastor and church consultant, I see this often.

WHY WE MUST TALK ABOUT TRANSITIONS

Whatever the reasons, the reluctance to discuss transitions is real. But this reluctance must be overcome, and it should generally be the pastor who overcomes his reticence and initiates the discussion. As one wise pastor remarked to his leadership about the end of his ministry at his church, “You can carry me out, you can kick me out, or I can walk out. I choose to walk out.”⁶

Demographic Realities

In 2011 baby boomers began to hit age sixty-five, and now ten thousand boomers a day reach that age. This will continue until the end of 2029.⁷ Federal and state laws now require certain publicly traded corporations and key occupations to have written succession plans.⁸ Should churches be less prepared than these (Luke 14:28–30)?

More full-time senior pastors are now over age sixty-five than under forty,⁹ and more than half of all current senior pastors are over age fifty-six.¹⁰ The median age of senior pastors is fifty-four, up from forty-four in 1992.¹¹ Many pastors will continue pastoring beyond age sixty-five, but they cannot continue forever; other pastors will choose to retire before age seventy.

The low birthrate of Gen X means that fewer pastors in their forties are available to take the place of retiring boomers, so churches' competition for those pastors will be intense. Additionally, many young pastors are content to minister where they are and do not consider "climbing the ladder" to larger churches and ministries as optimal for them, their families, or their churches. Smith points out another complication. "Most emerging leaders today would rather plant a church than deal with the baggage involved in changing a traditional church."¹²

The large number of pastors headed toward retirement, the shrinking pool of replacements, and the fact that all the churches looking for replacements will be fishing in that same small pool mean that pastors and churches must think and plan.

Cultural Challenges

There was a time in American culture when people were loyal to their churches and to the particular “brand” of those churches. “In that era of high denominational loyalty, transitions were much less disorienting owing to the off-the-shelf ministry approaches universally applied, simple programmatic paths to success (worship, Sunday School, youth group), an ample supply of ministers, and low mobility among church members. People tended to stay with a church through its transition, and the new pastor from Seattle used the same curriculum as the former pastor from Bloomington.”¹³

We no longer live in that era. In today’s highly mobile culture, with steep competition for people’s time, attention, and expectations of leadership quality, people are far less patient with long pastoral searches and a church’s haphazard vision. If the search is long or tumultuous, people will simply move on to another church or drop out entirely. Even with a well-planned transition, churches experience a drop in attendance of up to 15 percent.¹⁴

Transitions Are Inevitable

Laying aside today’s demographic realities and cultural challenges, pastoral transitions are common. In any given year, thirty thousand senior pastors are in a transition of some sort.¹⁵ The Leadership Network estimates that every year close to sixty thousand churches go through a pastoral leadership transition at some level.¹⁶

In other words, transitions will happen in church leadership. They are “the epidemic that no one wants to talk about.”¹⁷ Carol Weese and J. Russell Crabtree assert that a transition should not be treated like a terminal illness or death by being left unplanned or viewed as tragic.¹⁸ Instead, we should view pastoral transitions like a wedding with the father handing the responsibility for his daughter to the new man in her life.¹⁹

THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF A PASTORAL CHANGE

A pastoral transition can be the spark God uses to move a church to a new season of growth and fruitfulness. Done well, a transition allows ministry to continue without the massive upheaval that often accompanies a rapid pastoral departure followed by a prolonged search.

As he hands off the baton, the outgoing pastor shares his wisdom, his experience, and even his credibility with the incoming pastor. The outgoing pastor knows where the minefields are and can help the incoming pastor avoid explosions that will wound him and the church.

Long pastoral tenures are desirable and should be the goal for pastors and churches. “With a long-term pastorate comes stability, but stability unguarded becomes calcification.”²⁰ Another reality is that, whether we like it or not, the pastor’s age often significantly impacts the average age of the congregation. “Most churches age with their pastor, the average age in the congregation being about five years younger than their senior pastor’s age.”²¹

Every pastor must honestly assess his ministry, perhaps seeking outside eyes to help him see whether change is needed.

Bob Merritt, who transitioned from being a lead pastor in 2020 at age sixty-three, says, “It’s necessary and good for every organization to transition to younger leadership who has a new set of eyes and energy to keep charging the hill.”²²

The Barna Group contends that when a church loses momentum there’s little chance the current pastor will be able to turn it around, but a well-done leadership transition results in “clear gain” for many churches.²³ “Three out of five congregants and church staff members feel that, within the first year, pastoral succession had an overall positive effect on the priorities and style of their church’s ministry.”²⁴

The church landscape in the United States is littered with churches moving toward death unless God intervenes. “Every church is only one generation away from extinction.”²⁵ Indeed, America’s largest sixteen churches in 1967 shrank by 53 percent by 2019.²⁶ Most of us can look at churches we know and see that their life cycle is moving toward death unless God intervenes.

“Churches tend to follow a life cycle of birth to eventual death unless they interrupt and restart that cycle. It can be done but gravity is against them.”²⁷ A well-thought-out pastoral transition can be such an interruption, giving the church renewed vision and growth. Even for a healthy church, a pastoral transition can move it to the next level of fruitfulness for the glory of God.

Consider a relay race: A well-trained relay team, running and passing the baton correctly, can complete a course faster

than one person running the course alone. Rather than running a four-minute mile alone, a relay team can complete the course in three and a half minutes.²⁸ Churches can benefit from a fresh runner taking the baton for the next lap.

The sad contrast is “the far-too-often-played story of the pastor who keeps hanging on long after the vision and energy for the current ministry are gone, long after the community around the church has changed, or long after the congregation has stagnated.”²⁹ Pastors need to seek God’s direction through prayer and godly counsel as to whether the church needs a leadership change.

Bob Russell and Bryan Bucher relate the humorous but pointed story of a sixty-two-year-old son who nervously told his father that it was time for the father to step aside so the son could take over leading the business. His eighty-five-year-old father replied, “Forget it! Grandpa just gave it over to me three years ago.”³⁰ It is possible to wait too long for a leadership transition!

WISE FINANCIAL PLANNING

With a pastoral transition must come wise financial planning. If the incoming and outgoing pastors will overlap their ministries for weeks or months, the church will be paying the salaries of two lead pastors. This is a significant financial factor for churches. However, it is a wise financial investment in the church’s future and can be budgeted ahead of time if the transition is planned well in advance. Planning is critical. Andrew Flowers writes, “Setting aside money to

invest in your next pastor is simply being a good steward of what God has entrusted to you.”³¹

For small churches, the plan must be laid out several years ahead so funds can be accumulated—perhaps from endowments or by approaching donors for significant gifts. Additionally, a sister church may be willing to step in with counsel and assistance or even by developing a “fostering church” relationship. The sister church becomes a bridge between the outgoing and incoming pastors, alleviating some of the financial burden. Chapter 8 deals directly with advice for small churches.

MY STORY

I am one of those baby boomer pastors. As my wife and I discussed a possible transition, we concluded that even though the church was progressing well and I could continue to lead it for several years, we knew that another, younger voice was needed to guide the church into the future—someone with more energy and different gifts.

The church was still seeing a mixture of ages and was attracting young families, but the church had potential for greater ministry and impact. It was time to look for a younger pastor, and we knew that the search could be daunting and lengthy, so it needed to begin soon. I was convinced of this, and the church leadership became convinced as we discussed the possibilities. Chapter 7 gives criteria for evaluating whether it is time to consider a transition.

Bob Russell and Bryan Bucher warn, “Your friends or your Elders will tell you when you begin to lose effectiveness and it’s time to step aside. But if you wait until your friends muster up the courage to have that unpleasant conversation, you’ve waited way too long.”³²

