

### Evaluating a Pastoral Resignation and Move

Staying in the church can be the right thing to do. Leaving can be right also. The question is what is the right thing for you?

How can you know whether to stay or leave? The following table can help you evaluate.: Can you list any other poor, good or necessary reasons to leave a church?

Poor reasons for leaving:	Good reasons for leaving:	Necessary reasons for leaving:
Anger at the people and other aspects of your church situation	You have a new vision for a new church plant or other ministry	Personal moral failure
Discouragement about how things are going.	You feel the church needs someone else who can take it farther than you can	Health issues or even death
Attendance and/or offering is down.	The Lord has given you a sense of being released.	Protecting your family from ruthless treatment by church members
You can earn more money (greed) or reputation (pride) elsewhere.	Mentors and friends are encouraging you to move on.	Unable to manage your home. (1 Timothy 3:4)
Exhaustion	You locate an Apollos to lead the church,	"Fired" by the church
Conflict in the church	Your church won't plant daughter churches	An unsupportive spouse

Can you list any other poor, good or necessary reasons to leave the church?

#### Scripture Affirms Both Leaving and Staying

If you are called to leave, here is a passage of affirmation:

And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them." (Acts 16:7-10 ESV)

If you are called to stay, here is a verse of affirmation:

"So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good." (1 Peter 4:19 NIV)

## Potential Pastoral Transition Models

A new church pastoral transition is often quite different from one in a well-established congregation. What works in one situation will not necessarily work in another. Consider the options below to determine the best way to transition in your situation when God moves you on.

### **1. The Church Planter resigns and does almost nothing to help the transition.**

This is the more established church transition model where a pastor resigns his or her position. The pastor leaves the responsibility to the church to locate the next pastor.

In this situation the church often forms a committee to determine a plan. They outline what they need and desire. Then they call a new leader for the church. This system works well for a church that is able to handle major change.

But, this model often creates problems for a new church with young believers. They probably have no experience finding a new pastor. And, a new church might be teetering on the edge of viability, making this transition especially precarious. It may be difficult to find quality pastors who are able to take a new church still struggling with no building, no staff, etc. and help it grow.

Note: Receiving support from sister churches, the original mother church, or denominational leaders, etc. will be important in this scenario.

### **2. The Church Planter resigns and does almost everything for the transition**

In this model, the church planter finds the next pastor before moving on

While this may seem dictatorial to some, there is ample biblical precedence for this model in new churches: "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust." (Acts 14:23 NIV)

Paul wrote to Titus: "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you." (Titus 1:5 NIV)

It is clear that these three church planters (Paul, Barnabas and Titus) took responsibility for the welfare of the churches and the selection of qualified leadership.<sup>5</sup> While we are not told that there was any kind of vote by each congregation, perhaps the churches gave input to the apostles.

While not seeking to be dictatorial, missionary church planters today should consider if this approach is appropriate in their situation. Be sure to operate under the church by-laws if they exist while being "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16b, NIV). For example, if the church by-laws require a selection committee, make sure the committee convenes and assists in the selection. If the church membership is required to vote in some way, lead the church to vote.

The goal is to supply the best possible transition with the most hope of the church flourishing as you move on. This transition might take anywhere from a few months to a year. We recommend that you plan an ideal timeline.

### **3. An Intentional interim.**

Some churches call interim pastors to lead for a time between the church planter who is leaving, and the new second pastor. This provides a cushion between the two and allows the church to make the

major adjustment in leadership.

The interim's tenure can be used to provide an opportunity to:

- heal from the loss of the former pastor

- Clean up problems in the church

- Give perspective to the people by seeing another type of pastor with a different style of preaching and leadership

Normally an interim pastor agrees up front NOT to be a candidate to become the second pastor. Therefore, this prevents confusion about the role of the interim pastor.

Some suggest that because of the love and respect for and the special role of a Church Planter, an intentional interim is not just an option, it is a necessity.

#### **4. An Unintentional interim.**

Often, a church planter is so well loved and appreciated, that the second pastor becomes 5 Robert Saucy, The Church in God's Program (Chicago, Moody Press) 1972, 150.

an unintentional interim. The second pastor may have intended to stay a long time, but is forced to leave because of being unable to compare to the popular former pastor . It was a challenge for Apollos to follow Paul. People chose sides. The conflict was significant. See 1 Corinthians 3 for a vivid description.

#### **5. The Church Planter continues as a short-term Interim.**

Sometimes it works well for the Church Planter to continue for a time as the "interim pastor" after resigning as the pastor. This can provide some helpful pastoral continuity.

Pastor Jim Carpenter did this in a church he founded following his thirty-day resignation period. His only task during the interim period was preaching. He used his extra time to raise funds for the next church plant.

The arrangement lasted four months. By then, the church had selected a new pastor. During that time Jim had a sense that his ministry was completed. The congregation was prepared and ready to connect with the new pastor.

#### **6. A successor serves for a time with the Church Planter.**

Sometimes a church planter can continue to serve for a short time alongside the successor. Some churches find a successor outside of the church and allow him to serve with the Church Planter for a season before he or she eventually leaves. Other times a qualified associate already on staff can be a good match, thus providing a smooth transition. Either way provides continuity and stability to the church.

#### **Factors that can help determine how much a current pastor should help guide the transition and new pastor selection:**

The following items can be used to help gauge the health and vitality of a church plant and give you an idea of how much assistance to provide with a transition.

**Rate your church on a scale of 1-10, 1 meaning very unstable and 10 being quite stable.**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ The age of the church body - Are church members young babes in Christ or older and more mature spiritually? (1 Corinthians 3:1)
2. \_\_\_\_\_ The financial strength of the church—Does the church have adequate funds to pay a pastor?
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Facility stability—Is there a good long-term location to meet?
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Board strength and recommendation—Can they lead the church without the Church Planter present?
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Leadership—What staff or key lay leader issues will help or perhaps hinder?
6. \_\_\_\_\_ New believers or seasoned saints—Have they ever experienced a pastoral transition before?

### **Suggestions for a Smooth Transition**

#### **1. Carefully craft your resignation.**

In many cultures, it works best when you carefully write a resignation letter. This letter can be a firm foundation for your transition. It can:

- be precise when you are too emotional
- go where you cannot personally go
- repeat the message when people need repetition and reassurance

Your resignation should:

- express your pain, loss and regret in moving on.
- handle questions before they are asked, such as:
  - o Are you leaving because of a problem?
  - o Are you leaving for a better job offer?
  - o Are you leaving because the church has not treated you well?
- reassure people regarding your confidence in the future of the church,
- clearly outline the transition process and timing.

#### **2. Follow Proper Procedures.**

If the church has guidelines such as a Constitution and By-Laws, be familiar with them and abide by them. If the church has no written guidelines, consult with church leaders about the right approach in your situation.

#### **3. As appropriate, widen the circle of knowledge gradually.**

This could be done based on the relationship and commitment level to the church and pastor

- a. Perhaps inform the staff first
- b. Then the board or oversight committee
- c. Then key leaders, perhaps in visits to their homes or businesses
- d. Then other top leaders via phone calls
- e. An announcement to all gathered in the church one Sunday
- f. Finally a resignation letter mailed out to all associated with the church

#### **4. Express Emotion.**

Communicate your loss and pain even though you are probably further in the process of transition

and emotional healing than the people. People need to know you love and care. Tell them you will miss them.

Follow the example of the Apostle Paul who expressed deep emotion: "God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:8 NIV)

When Mark Williams didn't express his emotions during one transition, people thought he did not care. Mark thought he was being brave and strong. They thought he was heartless. Mark learned a valuable lesson about expressing emotion.

## **5. Be willing to work slowly with people.**

Go slower than you perhaps thought you would need. You may want to have confidential conversations with Key Leaders months before announcing the resignation. Entrepreneurial church planting leaders will likely be eager to move on to the next project. Try to lovingly slow down the process. Help people through the transition for the health of the body of Christ.

## **6. Consider the issue of perception**

People will wonder why their pastor is leaving. They will often question if he felt rejected, or did not like them, or wanted more money, and so on. Even if you carefully explain why you are doing what you are doing, people might wonder if there is another real reason.

Therefore, it is probably helpful to consider how your move will be perceived from the perspective of what kind of position you are moving to:

- A move to a seemingly equivalent role

For example, leaving a church of 200 to pastor another church of 200 might seem like an equal trade and cause speculation.

This type of move might be confusing and perceived more negatively. Seemingly, equivalent moves may cause people to ask questions like, "Why does our pastor dislike us? Something must be wrong? What have we done? What is he really thinking? Did they offer to pay more?"

- A move to a seemingly sacrificial role

If you leave a church to plant another church, people might respect that you are sacrificing to follow God's call.

While this might seem to be received more positively, this is not necessarily the case, particularly when people feel rejected by their pastor's leaving. Remember that the Apostle Paul, despite his sacrificial church planting ministry, had to defend his ministry and Apostleship. He was attacked and criticized.

- A move to a seemingly expanded role

This kind of transition might be most easily understood. For example, leaving to become a denomination leader or seminary president often makes sense to people.

However, you should still be prepared for negative emotions. Recently a ministry friend left to take a role in

a ministry with a major interdenominational impact across the entire USA. He was quite surprised at the level of anger that was expressed.

## **7. Try to detect and solve problems.**

As you go through the transition, try to be aware of people who need extra help trying to process what is happening. While you may be hurting, others might be hurting even more. So do not avoid difficult questions from people who are hurting. Deal with them in order to preserve the health of the church body.

After 2 years of ministry at Mark Williams' second church plant, Paul Becker challenged him, and God led him, to join the staff of DCPI fulltime. Mark wanted the church to experience a smooth transition to a new pastor. He shared with the Steering Committee his plan to resign. He communicated his goal to help the church find a new pastor before he left. While some were skeptical that this could be accomplished in the few months envisioned, they went to work looking for the right leadership.

The denominational leadership identified a pastor who sounded like a potential fit. They met and interviewed the potential pastor and invited him to visit the church without announcing candidacy. He agreed to move to the area and lead the church if the church agreed.

After gradually sharing with the circles of leadership, Mark resigned by reading his Resignation Letter at the end of service. A member of the Steering Committee was prepared to speak afterwards to share about the potential new pastor. He told the people there would be an opportunity to get to know the pastor and his family in a few weeks. He expressed his trust in God to guide.

The membership voted favorably. The day after Mark ended his ministry with the church, the new pastor stepped in. He was able to lead the ministry to growth over the coming years.

## **Assist in the Success of Your Successor**

Preparing the way for your successor may not be a very appealing thought. It may seem like preparing for your spouse to have a happy marriage to someone else after you die! But actually, it is more like making sure your baby is cared for if you die. The baby church needs you to make sure it is taken care of even if you are not there.

Here are some things you can do to help your successor succeed:

### **1. Always work to build faith in Jesus, not in yourself.**

Have you seen people who leave a church when the pastor leaves? Sometimes they leave that church, and never establish a relationship with a new church. This is an example of people who lean too much on their pastoral shepherd instead of the Good Shepherd.

Here are some ideas about how to keep this from happening:

- Preach and emphasize commitment to Christ, rather than to the pastor or a particular church.

- Develop small groups so relational commitments are to others and not just to the Pastor.

- Share decision-making instead of dictating. This will help teach the church self-leadership instead of dependence.

- Constantly delegate as much ministry as possible so the church does not revolve around you.

- Preach and live with unfailing faith in Christ as Lord, as Sovereign of the church universal, and of your particular local church.

### **2. Build up your successor.**

Even if you don't know who the new pastor will be, you can teach about the importance of honoring whoever leads.

"Brothers and sisters, we ask you to show your appreciation for those leaders who work among you and instruct you. We ask you to love them and think very highly of them because of the work they are doing. Live in peace with each other." (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 GW)

### **3. Keep good records and develop written office procedures.**

These will make it a lot easier to carry on church procedures. It is also helpful to offer an orientation for the new pastor.