

# Right or Wrong? Planning for Succession

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**A speaker at a leadership conference advised, “On your first day on the job, begin laying the groundwork for your successor.” I’m still trying to understand how this applies to ministers. Can you help me?**

The speaker offered good advice, since you are the steward of your position. In *Next: Pastoral Succession that Works*, the authors suggest every pastor is an interim pastor. Unless you do not plan on dying, you are holding a place in line for the pastor who will follow you. This perspective influences your leadership style and gives you a long-term view.

Intentionally preparing for a successor also is a blessing to the church if the pastor happens to become ill or faces an unfortunate accident. Do you have an emergency packet of information that could be accessed by the church leadership?

- **While you are the pastor:**

The best advice I can give is this: Be wary of centralized leadership. Ask yourself a couple of questions: “Is the church dependent upon my leadership?” “Does every committee look to me?”

On a practical level, make sure you are not the only person who knows how to fill and drain the baptistery. When issues arise, make sure to have thorough discussions with the appropriate group of servant leaders. As the steward, make sure you do not consolidate information and centralize power. Share the leadership. If the church struggles or falls apart after you leave, that is a reflection of your leadership.

- **After you leave:**

Respect the person who follows you. Much of your successor's success depends upon you. Treat your successor as you want to be treated. Do not inject yourself in the issues and circumstances of your former church. As tempting as it is, do not call grieving families and offer to "help" with the funeral. Bless your successor by distancing yourself from the congregation.

As autonomous congregations, Baptists do not have denominational regulations regarding former pastorates. But many structured denominations do not allow a pastor to remain a member of a previous church or even allow a pastor to retire in the city of the final congregation. Instead, the retiring pastor is instructed to get out of the way of the successor and allow the new pastor to lead the congregation unhindered.

Pastors are stewards of the church until the time comes to hand the baton to the next pastor. Recognizing the need for a succession plan helps pastors remember the goal is to pass along a healthy church from one pastor to the next.

Let me suggest two books for further reading: *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works* by William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird and *The Elephant in the Boardroom: Speaking the Unspoken About Pastoral Transitions* by Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree.

I wish you the best in laying a foundation for your successor.

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*If you have a comment about this column or wish to ask a question for a*

*future column, contact Bill Tillman, consulting ethicist for “Right or Wrong?” at [btillman150@gmail.com](mailto:btillman150@gmail.com).*