

BETHEL UNIVERSITY  
BETHEL SEMINARY ST. PAUL

LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION: A CONTINGENCY  
PLAN FOR THE INDEPENDENT CHURCH

A THESIS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### *The Problem*

This project addresses the need of a contingency plan and strategy for leadership succession. This project takes into account the difficulty that all churches experience with this vital need. Small independent churches are a trend in the twenty-first century, but are they fully equipped for longevity and do they have a contingency plan in place? The need for a strategy for leadership succession and reaching the next generation was the primary reason for the research project.

A second reason for the passion for leadership succession is the result of the researcher's relationship with a major denominational church which merged with a church of like denomination. For all practical purposes, this church's history and its identity ended. Merging with a church of like denomination is a form of succession. However, the merger appeared to be out of necessity. This raised a question, "Is this type of succession what the Lord intended for His church? Were there other alternatives and how could this situation been averted?"

When talking to other pastors, the researcher found that there was inertia, and a passive deference to leadership succession. This in itself made a compelling case for pursuing a strategy and plan for leadership succession. Although denominational churches may have an advantage over small independent churches because of the support of their affiliations, it is still expedient for them to develop their own internal leadership. All churches must have a plan and a strategy for reaching the next generation. The church is always one-generation away from solvency.

The Scriptures provide a theology for leadership succession in both Testaments. Leadership succession is relevant to the Great Commission. The Lord intended for the church to participate and take a proactive approach in fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20). The clause, “Till the end of the age,” clearly implies that the commission is inclusive for all ages. Although the mandate was given to the apostles, it has to include their successors.

Additionally, the commission is clear about what the apostle’s successors are to do. Knowing what to do, “Making disciples . . . end of the age,” is a given constant. The problem is how to do it in a twenty-first century context. Current research shows the ecclesiastical landscape has changed.

### *The Subproblems*

The first subproblem required the researcher to understand the independent church as a phenomenon. In the second subproblem, the researcher reviewed how the Scriptures address leadership succession. In the third subproblem the researcher explored journals and contemporary literature which focused on leadership succession. In the fourth subproblem, the researcher selected small independent churches for case studies. The fifth subproblem involved conducting onsite interviews with pastors and clergy who must consider leadership succession. During the interviews, the researcher gathered doctrinal statements, mission statements, constitutions and other documents which aided him in understanding the problem of leadership succession in small independent

community churches. The research provided the data and information for implementing a strategy for leadership succession in small independent community churches.

### *Theological and Contemporary Literature Review*

The research problem included gaining a perspective of the independent church as a phenomenon. Research showed that the movement is a trend which has not reached its peak. Scott Thumma's writes in his research paper:

It is commonly assumed by sociologists of religion that the numbers of nondenominational congregations in the United States are swelling at a rapid rate. . . . In addition, if current research which examines the factors contributing to congregational identity in traditional denominations is correct (where 75% of denominational church members do not think of themselves in terms of a denominational identity, combined with their congregations' often partial appropriation of denominational resources and labels), the nondenominational reality is closer to and more descriptive of the way many denominational congregations are currently functioning. Therefore, for these and other reasons, this phenomenon deserves to be examined more closely.<sup>1</sup>

Because independent churches lack denominational support it is necessary to consider how such churches relate to leadership succession.

The biblical record and the literature review made a compelling case for leadership succession. The Old and New Testaments provide a template for implementing a plan for leadership succession. Those who God calls are the predecessors who fulfill their calling and purpose by witnessing to their generation for the next generation who are their successors.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Thumma, "What God Makes Free is Free Indeed," [http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma\\_article5.html](http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma_article5.html) (accessed October 14, 2009).

The research considered how the contemporary church related to the apostolic church. The church has to be evaluated in accordance with its historical context. The church may not be of the world, but the church nevertheless is still in the world. It is inundated with the social changes imposed by the culture. In considering leadership succession, the research showed how the church must adapt to the social and technological changes.

Sydney Ahlstrom in *A Religious History of the American People* provided a narrative of many of the events that prompted and ultimately paved the way for the expansion and decline of church denominations. In his book, Ahlstrom provides a comprehensive history of the cultural, social changes and political landscape. McNeal's *Revolution in Leadership* expanded on social changes. McNeal describes how churches must be aware of paradigms shifts.

Paradigms can and do shift. The changes that precipitate these shifts can be either gradual or abrupt. The pressure to shift paradigms can come from outside or inside the person or organization. The shift may be perceived by people or organizations as positive or threatening. Whatever the impetus or circumstances, paradigm shifts always reflect the bottom line: the rules of the game have changed. Previous actions or values, once unquestioned, now may be suspect, counter-productive, or no longer tolerated because they violate new rules.<sup>2</sup>

The researcher has found this to be true. "Paradigm paralysis occurs when an individual or organization holds on too tightly to one paradigm."<sup>3</sup> The researcher also found that paradigm shifts are threatening to some and adaptation to change is necessary. Ministry processes need constant evaluation for efficiency and effectiveness.

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<sup>2</sup> Reggie McNeal, *Revolution in Leadership* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1998), 74.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

The literature review shows that traditional approaches to ministry are not in the apostolic tradition. The apostles embraced the missional approach of the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). Yet traditional approaches have worked in the past and there is a natural tendency to hold on to them as long as possible. Despite this fact, the context has changed and it is still necessary and expedient for the church to return to the apostolic missional approach to leadership succession by expanding the Kingdom through the priesthood of all believers and not just the professional clergy.

In the *Elephant and the Boardroom*, the authors describe the components and process for leadership succession through healthy transitions. The authors point out that the Lord Jesus Christ managed the major leadership transitions in His life. He managed the succession of His predecessor John the Baptist and succeeded in the transition of John's ministry. He chose His own successors and was involved in their training for ministry (Matt. 4:17-23). Lastly, He even managed His own departure and commissioned the apostles as His successors (Matt. 28:19-20, John 20:21).

Donna Schaper in "Leadership Transitions: What the Nonprofit World Can Teach Us" posits that leadership transitions are more likely to take place in healthy churches. In her article, Schaper writes, "executives often stay on as codirectors with the new director. They also often choose their own successors. They rarely leave in full and sometimes remain on the board of directors."<sup>4</sup> Some of the advantages she sees include the retention of organizational memory, trial periods for new leadership and the extended opportunity

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<sup>4</sup> Donna Schaper, "What the Nonprofit World Can Teach Us," *Congregations*, (Winter 2009) <http://search.atlaonline.com/pls/eli/ec.pdfapp.showpdf?myaid=ATLA0001698683> (accessed December 18, 2009)

for out-going leadership to share their experiences, expertise, concerns and vision for the future.

The literature research enabled the researcher to identify the themes, ideas and questions necessary for the practical aspects of the project. The literary research showed that the local church is responsible for its leadership. The church is entrusted with the apostolic mission. One reason for the independent church as a movement may be “God restoring the church to the New Testament Apostolic Pattern.”<sup>5</sup>

Leadership succession is not a stand-alone subject. In doing the literature review, the researcher identified several relevant leadership factors. Leadership must consider transience, turnover, leadership development and transitioning. While transience and turnover are factors often beyond an organization’s control, leadership development and transitioning are within an organization’s influence. The theological and literature research made a compelling and convincing case for churches to take a proactive position in dealing with the big subject that many would rather defer until necessary. A good leadership succession requires entrepreneurial leaders who do not leave successions to chance.

A good transition allows for the exchange of ideas along with the experience and expertise of the predecessor passed on to his or her successors. The Scriptures and the research have revealed a biblical apostolic approach to leadership succession. The Lord Jesus provided a model by affirming His predecessors and choosing His successors.

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<sup>5</sup> David Cannistraci, *Apostles and the Emerging Apostolic Movement* (Ventura, CA: Renew Books, 1996), 29.

### *Research Design and Methods*

The theological and literature reviews also helped to identify themes and questions to use in the research interviews.

The researcher considered the advantages and disadvantages of the qualitative and quantitative research designs and decided that the qualitative approach would better suit the project. The decision to choose a qualitative methodology and grounded theory was the nature of the research and subject matter.<sup>6</sup> The research was not a hypothesis to be tested, but rather a series of complex questions in need of findings.<sup>7</sup>

The research involved four small community churches in a case study. In selecting the churches, the researcher was looking for a well-rounded balance. The first church was relatively new and had not made a leadership succession. The interest here was the emergence of the independent church. Another was an older church that had made many successions and two newer churches which each made one leadership succession.

The researcher constructed two types of research instruments. The first type was for onsite interviews with the key informants at their respective locations. In addition, the researcher constructed online surveys to expand the research and looked for additional perspectives. One purpose of the online surveys was to expand the research beyond the formal interviews and obtain additional data. Another one was to reach a saturation point with the data and triangulate the findings.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall, 2005), 94.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



### *Coding the Data*

The researcher followed the suggested principles for grounded theory used in qualitative data research. The purpose was to derive a theory from the data collected in a natural setting.<sup>8</sup> A systematic approach of reading the raw data and then organizing it for classification of categories and derived meanings was followed.<sup>9</sup> This procedure was necessary to scrutinize the data and offer a consensus from it.

The beginning categories for coding the data were selected during the literary research and used in questions for the research instruments. These were coined starter codes. The first was obvious leadership succession. As the research began, other closely related subjects emerged such as turnover and transience. Still others pertained to positive factors for leadership development.

The researcher assigned the responses or derivatives as nodal codes. A software program enabled the researcher to retrieve and continuously compare the data. This process enabled him to indentify emergent themes, ideas, reach a saturation point with the data and find the resolution points.

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<sup>8</sup> Leedy, 144.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 151.

### *Research Findings and Analysis*

The research instruments showed a resistance to denominations and perceived hierarchies. The independent church movement seems related to freedom of expression in worship and the need of spiritual experience. Even though a church's theology may be orthodox, it may be a dry orthodoxy.

The research showed that many churches are grounded in contemporary traditions and take modern positions on leadership succession. The pulpit and search committees are two traditional approaches to leadership succession. The researcher examined several documents that relate to the procedure and process of the pulpit and search committees. Although the churches do follow well thought out guidelines and procedures, the process can become cumbersome and time consuming.

The pulpit and other such ad hoc committees appear to be more traditional than biblical. In addition, the tedium of the process runs the risk of a DNA mismatch in pastoral leadership with a particular congregation. This is likely to occur when a pulpit committee becomes exhausted from an extended search. However, the underlying problem is the tendency to neglect leadership development in the local church.

The data gathered during the research showed that most of the churches considered the pulpit or search committee as a provision and a contingency plan for leadership succession. The research found little regard for pre-planning for leadership succession. In addition, leadership succession is too important to be left for chance. A poor transition is a prelude for a less than par leadership succession. The research showed

that leadership transitions are vital and important and indispensable for leadership successions.

The research discovered that showed good leadership successions are possible through networking. Partnering with parachurch organizations is useful for leadership preparation and development. Leadership successions are enhanced through good transitions. This process takes place through time and seems to happen best when there is plurality of elders.

### *Recommendations and Conclusions*

The emergence of a global culture has changed the dynamics of the church. Although this is such, the church today, still somewhat reflects the apostolic church of the past. This being the case a policy for leadership succession is befitting through a renewed apostolic approach. This would require the church to create the capacity for its own leadership development.

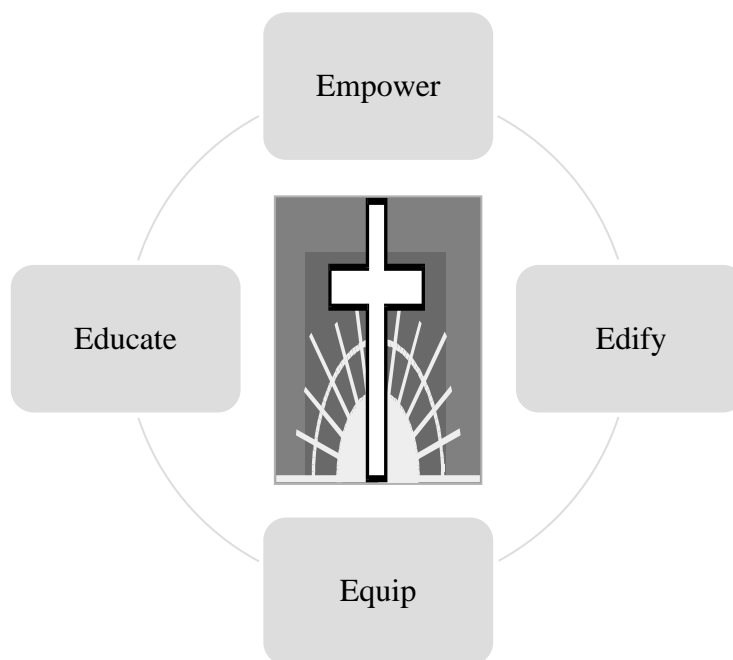
The research shows the need to integrate contemporary practices with those of the early church. This involves a contextual emergence of those workable practices of the past and the present. There needs to be an overlap of the predecessor with the successor. This one practice has worked well within the corporate world. Yet churches seem to disavow promoting from within. This is a great paradox because the laity emerges within the congregation.

During the analysis of the data and research, other emerging themes surfaced which require more research. Skillfully using modern technology can facilitate leadership

development. Modern technology has made it possible for churches to innovate and become more intimate within the body of Christ.

Social media has created the capacity and opportunities for churches to become more intimate with parachurch and academic institutions. It is only in trying to maintain the traditions of the past that churches forfeit the technological benefits and innovations of the present. In essence, more research is needed to determine how social media and parachurch organizations can contribute to leadership succession. The research showed leadership succession is best facilitated through networking within the body of Christ and partnering with parachurch ministries. Cooperation between churches and parachurch organizations is needed to reach this end. Figure 1.1 describes how churches and parachurches create the capacity for those to serve within the body of Christ.

**Figure 1.1 Renewed Apostolic Approaches to Leadership Succession**



The apostolic approach to creating the capacity for leadership succession fits well with the Scriptures:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up . . . From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:11-16 NIV).

The literary review and the research have suggested that the capacity for leadership development is in a practical environment. Churches need to create the capacity for its successive leaders to discover and develop their spiritual gifts for ministry in ministry.

The research has shown that emerging leaders need to be properly prepared for ministry. Education is empowerment. Emerging leaders need to be encouraged to utilize their gifts in the ministry. Emerging leaders need support and equipping for ministry. Emerging leaders need to be edified so they can become confident and competent for ministry (Eph. 4:11-16).

The above model in Figure 1.1 is a biblical practical approach to leadership development for all churches and parachurch organizations. Churches and parachurches become socially innovative and intimate through cooperative unity and networking. This increases the potential for maximizing spiritual capital and resources within the body of Christ.

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