

LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS: THE ARGUMENT FOR A RENEWED APOSTOLIC AND TRANSFORMATIONAL APPROACH

In order to face the growing challenges and concerns of leadership the church must reconsider its current leadership succession policy. This article compares contemporary and traditional models for working through transitions in pastoral leadership with a biblically-based renewed and transformational model. The analysis draws from both the Old and New Testaments, and includes findings from a recent qualitative case study.

The lack of a leadership-succession plan and the sudden departure of a long-tenured pastor can adversely affect the congregation in several ways. At some point virtually every church will have to address this. It is a fact of ministry as congregations experience emotions such as sorrow and remorse over the loss of its pastor. One common scenario is the departure of a pastor resulting from God's call to another church.

In the *Elephant in the Boardroom*, the authors describe this kind of situation and the cost of not having a leadership succession and transition plan in place.¹ When a congregation loses its pastor it has to respond promptly and positively in order to meet the unexpected pastoral need. A good leadership succession is dependent upon a well-thought through plan for transition.

Clearly leadership turnover and transience in the church create a demand for new leadership. When dealing with this situation many churches follow traditional methods for filling leadership needs. This raises the question: Are traditional means such as the pulpit or search committee sufficient, or is a renewed apostolic approach preferred to meet a church's leadership needs? A renewed apostolic approach is a proactive approach that creates capacity for its

¹ Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree, *The Elephant in the Boardroom* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004)

congregation to discover and develop spiritual gifts for ministry. For an organization to succeed it must have a succession plan in place that addresses these considerations.

The need for healthy leadership succession[s] in the church is vital, especially if the concern or desire is for long-term pastoral leadership. Long-term pastoral leadership does not happen by chance, and a variety of factors come into play. Recent qualitative research reveals leadership successions are dependent on well-implemented transitions. The Scriptures reveal much about leadership succession and the need for healthy transitions

The Old Testament and Leadership

Leadership and succession are significant throughout the Old Testament. The relationship between Moses and Joshua typifies leadership and succession needed for the nation to succeed in the Promised Land. After being informed by God that he would not take part in leading and settling the nation in the land, Moses asked the Lord to choose a successor. The context of this passage demonstrates the transition of leadership from Moses to Joshua. Clearly God initiated the transition and chose the successor. It is significant to note in these verses that the transference of leadership occurs over time and includes a viable transition (cf. Num. 27:12-21).

Significantly, the Scriptures show the cooperation the predecessor and his successor occurs before the whole community. Moses as the outgoing leader is concerned for the community and appeals to the Lord to appoint a successor to take his place.² The transfer of divine authority is a process bestowed and delegated (Num. 27:20). A formal ceremony takes place before the community that precedes the eventual transfer of leadership succession (Num. 27:18-23).

² Frank E. Gaebelin, *The Expositors Bible Commentary Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1990), 945.

Similarly, leadership succession was prevalent among the prophets. In 1 Kings 19:16 Elijah is told by the Lord to anoint Elisha who will be his eventual successor. As with Moses and Joshua, so it was with Elijah and Elisha. God initiated the act of succession and was actively involved in selecting both predecessor and successor.

In sum, Moses and Joshua and Elijah and Elisha as predecessors and successors were appointed by God to lead and witness to a people. God called Moses to declare Himself to Pharaoh and the people of Israel (Exod. 3:14). Moses, prior to his departure, asks the Lord to provide a successor for the nation (Num. 27:12-21). In the same manner, the Lord instructs Elijah to anoint Elisha to succeed him (1 Kings 19:16-21).

Both of these examples have to do with leadership succession as a subject further enhanced by a well-implemented transition. Another distinction is that in each case the predecessor played an important part in preparing his successor to succeed in his place.

Although it must be admitted that the Old Testament describes an ancient custom, nevertheless the principles and practices are still relevant for today. Contemporary leaders need to rely on the Lord for additional laborers that can follow in their footsteps (cf. Matt 9:37-38). Current leaders can practice and emulate the biblical principles of the patriarchs by taking part in the selection of their successors.

The New Testament and Leadership

The New Testament contains passages that describe leadership succession and transitions. Additionally, a clear vision for ministry and leadership development can be found in these texts. In the biblical model the Lord Jesus affirmed His predecessor John and chose His successors. He invested His time and energy to their spiritual formation and development.

In building His church the Lord invested time modeling and teaching His disciples. Before his departure he commissioned those he had chosen to continue in the mission and ministry.

The vision of Christ for leadership succession needs to become the church's mission. It begins with going, baptizing and teaching and spells out what the church is to do:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20).

This commission is a mandate entrusted to the church "to the very end of the age." Christ's intention is for continuance of the mission and prolonged existence of the church until his return.

In Acts, the apostle Paul makes the case for a plurality of elders. While meeting the Ephesians' the apostle Paul reminded elders that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers of the church of God: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). In giving these instructions to the elders Paul emphasizes that the Holy Spirit is the "administrator of the church's affairs."³ In this context a plurality of elders is a model for renewing the church to an apostolic format useful for leadership succession and transition.

In the *Elephant and the Boardroom*, the authors describe the components and process for leadership successions. 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

³ Herbert Lockyear, *All about the Holy Spirit* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc, 1981), 22.

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.”⁴ Some of the advantages she sees include the retention of organizational memory, trial periods for new leadership and the extended opportunity for out-going leadership to share their experiences, expertise, concerns and vision for the future.

Traditional Approaches and Transitions

Presently, little has been written about leadership succession and the importance of transitions in a church setting. Yet the subject is very important for the church. A reason for this may lie with the negative perception of such a topic—no one really wants to address transience. A contemporary means of dealing with leadership succession and transition is the traditional pulpit or nominating committee.

Because traditional approaches in leadership have worked in the past there is a natural tendency to hold on to them as long as possible. Although traditional pulpit and nominating committees work, it is our contention that they are not fully consistent with the apostolic tradition. The apostles embraced the missional approach of the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:5, 9), and did not make a distinction between professionals and laity.

⁴ 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)

Traditionally, churches have formed committees to search for a pastor. The search or pulpit committee has the specific task of finding a pastor. The search committee is a short-term task committee that disbands after it has completed its task of finding a pastoral replacement. Although common, this practice appears to be more traditional than biblical.

When a vacancy occurs, a pulpit committee is assembled that normally consists of several members of the deacon board and several appointed members of a congregation. A typical pulpit committee finds candidates, screens resumes and reviews qualifications of potential candidates. Upon agreement on a perspective candidate, the committee arranges for the candidate to preach to the congregation.

The case can be made for traditional approaches to leadership succession. Many older churches have followed traditional approaches to leadership succession and are still viable and reaching the next generation with the gospel. The pulpit committee has contributed to church succession and acts as a stabilizing means of providing a reactionary plan in time of need. But how well has the traditional pulpit committee really worked? What has this customary approach contributed to leadership development? Although the primary purpose of a pulpit committee is to find new leadership when necessary, the problem is that it can be more a reactionary force than a proactive approach to leadership development.

In considering the traditional and apostolic approaches to leadership succession, the former is passive while the latter is proactive. The pulpit committee is task-oriented while the apostolic model is mission-driven. The pulpit committee assembles when there is a need and dissolves when the task is complete. If the pulpit committee is not included in the transition, it goes back to the constitutional shelf to await its next appointed time.

A primary concern is the potential for the eventual exhaustion that search committees experience after a lengthy search. In such a condition the pulpit or search committees may not produce a candidate that matches the church's need. A mismatch is detrimental to both the incoming pastor and the congregation.

Nancy Ammerman expands this concept further: "In addition to being shaped by a theological tradition, congregations are also, of course, shaped by the larger secular culture in which they are located."⁵ Ammerman believes that churches are unique and a product of their own cultures:

A congregational culture is constructed out of all the materials we have been discussing—theological and denominational traditions, expectations from a larger culture, patterns of a social class and ethnicity, and the like. All those things are carried into the congregation by its members and leaders. Whenever any of those elements changes, the congregation will inevitably as well.⁶

Ammerman also believes that churches have the ability to adapt to cultural changes. This study does not dispute this, but rather considers the duration of time. Leadership successions and transitions are subject to time-related factors. The potential problem in recruiting leadership outside the local church is the possibility of not finding someone compatible with the congregation. The writer finds it is best for a local church to develop its own homegrown leadership than to struggle waiting for the congregation to adapt to subtle changes imposed upon it. Leadership succession is enhanced through in-ministry development. The significance of the congregation being part of the transition is vital to the process and the successor.

Although the traditional pulpit committee often is used it is not the only or best means of providing pastoral leadership. The committee does little if anything with transition. On the other

⁵ Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney, *Studying Congregations*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998, 79.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

hand, with a renewed apostolic approach transition occurs through a natural process in a congregational setting.

Qualitative Case Study

Although the study is not based on quantitative empirical data it does consist of qualitative data from several case studies. The importance of empirical data was a consideration; however, the subject matter was more in-line with qualitative methods. A multiple case study required information and data from key persons at their locations. A qualitative case study was better-suited to provide a descriptive narrative relating to how transitions in leadership affect a congregation. Qualitative data provided the detail and specifics of the actual settings. The findings were the result of grounded theory (immersed in the gathered data) and codifying the data with the aid of software programs used for qualitative data.

The process of the case studies followed principles for grounded theory used in qualitative data research. The purpose was to derive a theory from the data collected in a natural setting.⁷ A systematic approach of reading the raw data and then organizing it for classification of categories and derived meanings was followed.⁸ This procedure was necessary to scrutinize the data and offer a consensus from it.

The considerations of leadership transitions are based on biblical perspectives and contemporary applications. The research data consist of the responses gathered from interviews of several churches that have made successful leadership successions. The findings of the data

⁷ Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall, 2005), 144.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

described the importance of transitions. The research identified variables and components of leadership transitions.

In one church the successor reflected on how his predecessor preached his final sermon during the service. At the end of the service the pastor called his successor to come before the congregation and then passed a mantel, prayer shawl and staff to his successor. This practice is consistent with the biblical record of Moses and Joshua and Elijah and Elisha. The successor also stressed the importance of working alongside his predecessor for twelve years. The study showed that even though this particular church did not have a formal plan for leadership succession it followed biblical examples and principles. It succeeded in its first transfer of leadership and implemented a well-processed transition. In such a harmonious relationship (twelve years) the transition was smooth and the cost minimized over time. The eventual transition was always anticipated and the congregation properly prepared for the inevitable day.

Transaction versus Transformation Transitions

The literature and the data gathered from the case studies show that traditional methods of leadership succession are more transactional based. Transactional leadership is concerned for an end justifying the needs. Another consideration is Transactional methods are policy and process driven. While this in itself is not wrong, a transactional style is less relational than a transformative approach.

A renewed apostolic approach is transformational and biblically based. The whole congregation is involved in the process. This approach includes such positive factors as creating the capacity for others to discover and develop their spiritual gifts for ministry. This approach is

more relational and is better suited to create harmonious relationships going forward. A transformative approach to leadership transitions aligns with the Scriptures. The case studies make a compelling case for transformational leadership. They show that the transformational approach is preferable in comparison with transactional transitions, because leadership transitions happen best when they are transformational and relational.

In the case studies, one responder reflected on the relational aspects of the transformative transition through his own experience. “It was such a smooth transition, as if the heartbeat of the church never changed.” The writer notes that the responder was a homegrown product of the church. In the course of time he developed into a pastoral leader. The congregation was fully aware of his pastoral giftedness. In this case the local church took a proactive approach to leadership by creating the capacity for its membership to discover and develop their spiritual gifts in ministry. The church is a laboratory for transformation.

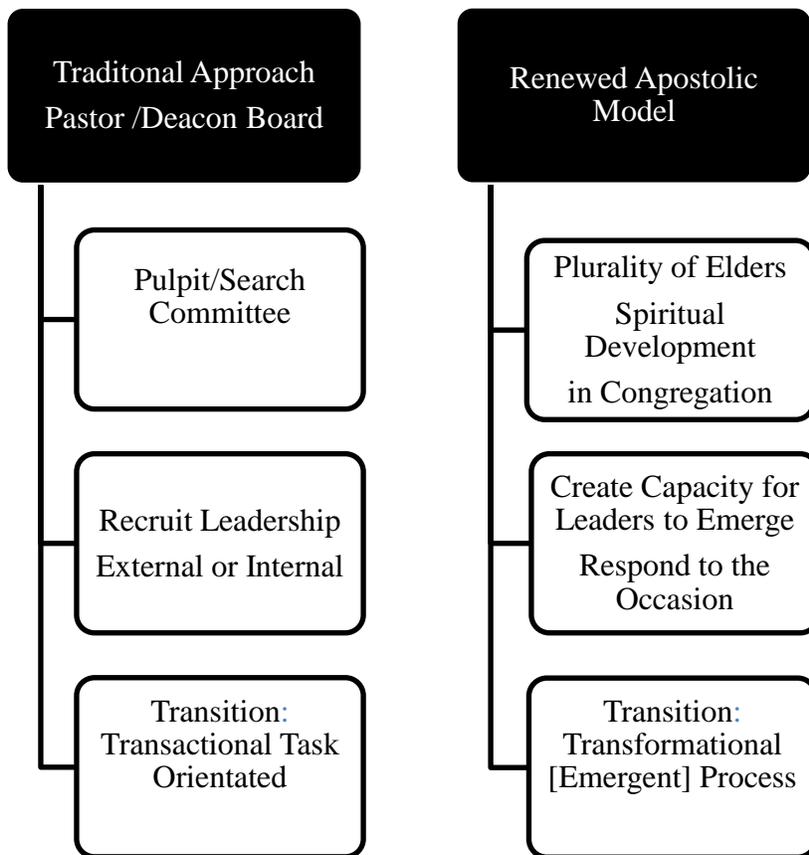
Another participant affirmed the necessity for churches to take an intentional approach within its own rank and file. “I am about training leadership for two generations deep.” This approach is highly relational and involves the harmony and closeness of a mentor-mentee relationship. The congregation is a part of the process and the successor is a part of the church. If there is a mismatch the potential for conflict and spiritual paralysis is possible. The possibility of such a condition is less likely with homegrown leadership.

Keys to a Healthy Transition

In congregational structured churches, the pulpit committee’s purpose is stated in the church constitution and those serving on the committee have guidelines to follow in the selection

of a candidate. The traditional pulpit committee is task oriented and temporal, while the apostolic approach focuses on a cyclical process. A hidden cost in the traditional approach is the potential of a long search process and the possibility of committee fatigue. In this condition the committee looks for a way to complete the transaction. Whereas a traditional pulpit committee might tend to emphasize professional and academic credentials, the apostolic approach is more interested in spiritual giftedness in ministry (2 Tim. 2:2, 15). The renewed apostolic approach to leadership transitions also is transformational. (Figure1).

Figure 1 Renewed Apostolic Model



Key Personnel in Transformational Transitions

The Lord Jesus was at the center in his own transitional process. We noted above that He affirmed His predecessor John the Baptist and chose His successors the apostles and as such was an active part of the process. He further encouraged them in ministry. He taught them a vision and prepared them for mission. The Lord managed the transition and through the Holy Spirit he equipped and empowered the disciples for ministry (Acts 1:1-8). By doing so he provided a pattern for the church to follow. In following the pattern of the apostles, they ordained a plurality of elders in every church (Acts 14:21-23). A plurality of elders is a leadership team responsible and accountable to create the setting for their disciples to discover and develop spiritual gifts for ministry. The apostles believed in the priesthood of all believers (1Pet. 2:9). In succeeding generations within local churches disciples connected with their calling and emerge and transition into their respective leadership positions.

Conclusion

All organizations must plan for the inevitable and the eventuality of leadership transience and those in leadership positions must likewise face the facts of their own mortality. In extending longevity of the organization, it is in the best interests of those in leadership to take a proactive approach with planning for leadership changes. It is important for leaders to bring the congregation in the process. Isolating the congregation from the process does little to maintain harmonious relationships. An inadequate transition can contribute to a short-term pastorate with

the congregation and church bearing the burden and cost, which is unwholesome for the spiritual condition of the congregation.

The present study and research suggests that a renewed apostolic approach to leadership succession is better than traditional methods. Positive leadership transitions should be considered in terms of retaining institutional memory and transferring the experiences and expertise upon to the successors. In a harmonious transition of leadership the predecessor often is available for consultation if needed.

The study further suggested the capacity for leadership development is in a practical environment. Future leadership discovers and develops spiritual gifts for ministry in their own local church. The study 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 and need to be edified so they can become confident and competent for ministry. The end result is the continuity of cyclical leadership within the congregation. The transition is harmonious between key persons and the congregation. The next generation of leaders emerges and transitions into pastoral leadership positions because elders and leaders within the local church created the capacity for them to become leaders.