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## Planning and Implementing Successful Pastoral Succession

Parnell M. Lovelace Jr.  
*Center of Praise Ministries*

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**PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING SUCCESSFUL  
PASTORAL SUCCESSION**

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Bishop Parnell M. Lovelace, Jr.

**abstract**

The senior pastor serves as the visionary catalyst for the local church congregation. Cultural, ethnic, and theological traditions define the pastor's role, often determining how the pastor plants a church, leads people, and transitions once the pastoral assignment is completed. None of these responsibilities is easy. However, the matter of pastoral succession brings concerns, sensitivities, and challenges that are unique within any discussion of ministerial success. Center of Praise Ministries in Sacramento, California, provides several examples of paradigms, challenges, and mores that one must address when facilitating healthy transition. This article explores how intentional and strategic pastoral succession planning provides a means by which a church develops healthy constructs that facilitate the possibilities of growth and expansion.

You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. You therefore, must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who

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enlisted him as soldier. And also, if anyone competes in athletics, he is not  
crowned unless he competes according to the rules. The hard-working farmer  
must be first to partake of the crops. Consider what I say, and may the Lord  
give you understanding in all things (2 Timothy 2:1–7).<sup>1</sup>

258 The apostle carefully instructs his pastoral apprentice, noting that the gospel and the testimony of Jesus Christ must continue beyond his imminent physical departure. It would appear that Paul embraces the idea that his ministerial assignment includes that of assuring a continuity and perpetuation of the church's teachings. Paul shares directive with Timothy that addresses the need for faithfulness, sustainability, and impartation. The heart of Jesus Christ reveals this idea as He exhorted the importance of disciples making other disciples (Matthew 28:19–20). The emphasis of faithfulness to the truth constitutes effective and true pastoral succession. The least of Paul's concern is that of any materialistic, ego-sustaining, or societal status posturing. He acknowledges that there are others beyond himself that play an integral part in presenting the message of the kingdom to the world. He also presents analogies that reflect the process of implementing succession infrastructure and culture.

The following three characterizations are discussed: the military soldier, the athlete, and the farmer. I submit that these three give insight to facilitating biblical pastoral succession.

### **success—now what?**

Center of Praise Ministries is a thriving and vibrant congregation that is embracing the heart of the Great Commission. The weekend celebrations continue to draw people from all lifestyles. An excitement resonates at each gathering and home group study. Still, a concern remains. Will the momentum of ministry be sustainable when the current senior pastor leaves? What will happen if the pastor becomes ill or passes away? Who will take over if the pastor retires? People infrequently verbalize these questions, but they are possibly think these thoughts as the church grows.

The Center of Praise Ministries was planted in 1989 as a nondenominational church with an emphasis of merging biblical foundation and social advocacy. The demographic of the congregation is seventy percent African American, twenty-five percent Anglo, and five percent other ethnic groups. The church is located in the heart of Midtown Sacramento. The area continues to experience both a social and

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references are from the NKJV translation unless otherwise stated.

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economic renaissance, as the area is expanding beyond the years of economic recession. The church holds three weekend worship celebrations, hosting over 3300 people. The current senior pastor is also the founding pastor. The pastor leads, and the advisory council (board) governs the congregation. The congregants have the power to ratify major decisions of the advisory council. Specifically, matters of pastoral selection and land acquisition are presented to the church congregation for final ratification and approval. A need exists to present a clear directive that will assure healthy leadership transition in order to experience ministry sustainability.

### **three characteristics of succession**

Strong shares, “Although the Bible does not speak specifically about the process of pastoral transition, many passages provide leadership principles that apply to transitions in pastoral leadership. These principles help direct local churches when faced with one of the most critical decisions, the transition of pastoral leadership.”<sup>2</sup> Paul shares with young Timothy that the outgrowth of faithfulness is to understand the warfare dynamic of ministry as it relates to declaring the principles of God’s Word. The threat that is posed when multiplying spiritual leadership should never be underestimated. Paul’s reference to a being a “good soldier” demonstrates this encouragement. A good soldier must not be preoccupied with the hardships of life or with the hardships that accompany the church. Make no mistake—ministry is difficult. Therefore, an understudy or one who assumes leadership within the footsteps of a predecessor must be willing to assume the discipline of a soldier who is responsive to honoring the authority of Jesus Christ and honoring the legacy of the preceding pastor. Second, this example conveys the importance of the predecessor assuming a position of submission to the One who has called those to serve. He who has called those that serve has the authority to reassign leadership as He so desires. The objective of all within healthy pastoral calling is to serve the Lord at His pleasure.

The second analogy presented in the text is that of the athlete. The apostle shares that the objective of great success is that of competing according to the rules. The one who understands the processes that bring victorious outcomes assumes the crown affirming successful participation and discernment of what may facilitate disqualification. The healthy leader will grasp the larger context of stewardship and mentorship within the scope of pastoral transitioning. His or her concern for the congregation and his or her own physical well-being will engage ideas of teamwork and the passing of the baton to the next team member.

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<sup>2</sup> Strong.

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Anything less than a team focus will malign and undermine the ability for churches to grow and expand.

Paul's third analogy is that of the farmer. A pastor is challenged to embrace the stewardship mantle of the farmer. The farmer is given the responsibility to sow towards a future harvest. A wise farmer will understand that the crop of the harvest is to be shared beyond himself. The blessing of being one that participates in the crop harvest is evident as the preceding pastor observes the continuation of salvations, baptisms, and discipleship through the next pastoral leader.

Again, retaining the church parsonage or retirement pension does not facilitate the measure of successful pastoral leadership. Rather, the measure of success is the carefully implemented pastoral succession that invokes the training models presented through the characteristics found in a good soldier, an athlete, and a farmer. A deliberate and well-planned process greatly enhances the opportunity to see the church expand and grow.

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### **what does healthy succession involve?**

Robert W. Strong recently conducted a study that discovered that pastoral transition takes place in the following three primary ways: pastoral appointment, pastoral or governing board recommendations, and a search committee. He concluded that the current condition of a ministry determines which methodology will be most effective. He further concluded that pastoral appointment and board recommendation was the more effective concept rather than a search committee process. Therefore, a solid succession plan provided the best chance for fruitful pastoral transition.

The definition of a true succession plan is a detailed written plan that the highest leadership of the local church ratifies and that the church implements, to accomplish a smooth transition from one pastor to another. The senior pastor may initiate such a plan and/or a group designated within the church to assist the pastor with polity matters. Certainly, the role and interface of the denominational structure, if applicable, is required to aid the plan. The overall governing structure of the church presents the variables that determine to what extent they present the plan. The objective would be at minimum to have the discussion of what plan to implement in the event of the immediate removal of the senior pastor or an anticipated departure. Emphasis is on presenting a plan in writing to encourage clarity, continuity, and presenting as a template for future internal (within the local church) or external (other congregations) usage.

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A succession plan should be founded upon strong emphasis of biblical guidance. Respected pastor Walter August vehemently contests the use of search committees in the process of selecting a pastor. He purports, “When a pastor dies suddenly, 80% of search committees choose the wrong pastor.” He draws this conclusion based on his understanding of Scripture, his personal experience with other pastors, and his conviction that the current pastor should appoint a successor. Gerald Gillaspie, a denominational leader, aligns with this biblical stance from a denominational view. “The Bible also does not give us any indication of an authoritative council to delegate available pastors to empty pulpits.” Ideally, an effective succession planning process should allow for on-the-job training and observation.

Second, a pastoral succession plan will greatly benefit with the input and support of the senior pastor. The pastor should have an opportunity to serve in conversation, assessment, and selection of a succeeding candidate. This is particularly true if the pastor has served the congregation well and if the church is in a relatively healthy position. In the case of a long-serving leader, the respect and honor given him, in many instances, will posture the congregation to receive the new pastor well if they perceive the predecessor has given support and blessing to the candidacy process. Many would argue that the apostle Paul’s affirmation of Timothy provided a means by which the various congregations that he served could receive Timothy. Therefore, the predecessor pastor provides both spiritual and emotional guidance towards a transition that is most often very difficult for a church.

Church-wide team participation is critical for the success of a true pastoral succession. Key leaders within the congregation, and possibly the church congregation itself, should hold frank discussions, particularly if the church is structured through congregationally governed systems. The church should hold these discussions beyond the context of crisis. The objective is to encourage the “what if” scenario as a means of setting strategies that serve as contingency plans at minimum and ultimately setting a healthy course of ministry continuance.

Third, a dynamic pastoral succession plan must be presented as a positive action versus a sad occasion. The emotional baggage associated with change is expected. Although change is inevitable, effective planning may minimize the level of uncertainty that accompanies change. A good transition plan helps churches see clearly through the process of change. Such an intentional approach to the subject should occur, that the element of fear is secondary to more pragmatic concerns, such as acquiring suitable succession candidates and creating an environment

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within the church that is principle versus personality focused. The fact remains, if the pastor is no longer able to serve for any reason, a need exists for a systematic, well-developed plan of pastoral replacement. The more deliberate the discussion of a ministry's future, the more deliberate action will be referenced. A positive approach, with celebration of what has been accomplished under the preceding leader, will give excitement for what possibilities await as a church follows fresh and innovative concepts presented under leadership succession. Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, a CEO retirement specialist states, "But when the time comes to step aside for newer, and almost always younger, leaders, many high corporate officers are beset with the fears that Otto Rank described: Leaving office means a loss of heroic stature, a plunge into the abyss of insignificance, a kind of mortality."<sup>3</sup> Transitioning pastors must grasp that future-focused leaders with fresh perspective allow a church to reignite core values and the commitment to expand to greater outreach and church growth.

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A deliberate pastoral succession plan should be willing to explore new territory that moves beyond the boundaries of tradition, church culture, and ethnic/cultural constructs. Some traditions give thought to the belief that a senior pastor should serve until death. The demands placed upon pastors within such belief systems often expedite the outcome. The church that fails to grasp the importance of continuity will observe contentious and negative aspects that are often associated and heightened where there are elements of uncertainty of the ministry's future. One must concentrate on merely what has been in the past. A casting forth of visionary perspective of what God desires to reveal in the future of both the ministry of the predecessor and the ministry of the church under the successor must occur.

The well-implemented pastoral succession plan must be reproducible. Each point of succession development should be well documented (the good, the bad, and the ugly). Often, ministry leaders attempt to convey only the concepts that worked well. At times, a self-serving perspective presents ideologies as being flawless. Such conveyance is both disingenuous and misleading. Transition can be difficult, heart wrenching, and carry an element of tension as the process evolves. The transparency and vulnerability of the transitioning team provides a model that is replicable and appreciated by those that seek to experience the benefit of healthy planning and pastoral placement.

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, *The Hero's Farewell: What Happens When CEOs Retire*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3.

## Lovelace: Planning and Implementing Successful Pastoral Succession six components of succession plan development

Criteria that are comprehensive and evaluative throughout the entire process of transition facilitate a successful pastoral succession plan. The leadership team determines the length of time to implement such processes designed to be flexible. Second, the criteria may be customized around various denominational perspectives or core values that are relevant to the church of placement. Therefore, they are generalized within this presentation as to allow concepts regarding the discussion of leadership succession to flow beyond rigid systems that may not address various ministry settings.

### **assessment**

Every succession model must first begin with the idea of what is desired in a pastoral candidate. This begins with the assessment criteria. The assessment focus pinpoints such thoughts as to the age, family life, spiritual background, theological training, and pastoral ambitions. Although this time may begin with general observation, the assessment phase can be very detailed and requires extensive attention to determine the best candidates of consideration. Some congregations have broadened this phase to include such inquiries as professional psychosocial screenings and financial profiles. Many congregational leaders have resorted to extensive criminal background checks and verification of educational transcripts. Various denominational groups and networks offer pastoral “boot camps.” These intensive gatherings are designed to present evaluative guidelines to potential pastoral candidates. Often they are developed with the emphasis on new church planters. However, this may also serve as a resourcing pool for those desiring to lead existing ministries. The more thorough the assessment, the better opportunities are given to evaluate strong candidates of consideration.

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### **affirmation**

The criteria of affirmation focuses on the role of the predecessor and/or leadership team relying on the ministry of the Holy Spirit to guide in the selection of a candidate and communicating the belief that a plan is at work within the leadership continuance in the church. Such affirmation draws from the exhaustive requirements presented within the assessment phase. This aligns with Paul’s instruction to Timothy, “Lay hands on no man suddenly” (1 Timothy 5:2). This period of affirmation requires great trust on the part of the church and of the pastoral candidate. It is the period in which someone may clearly state, “We believe that God is doing something here.” The predecessor must also be affirmed within



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the desire to transition leadership. He must receive continual feedback that to plan transition is not only healthy, but it also fully aligns with God's desire to see the church grow and to systematically raise godly leaders.

### **confirmation**

This phase assumes that the candidate for succession has been vetted through thorough assessment, and a clear affirmation is provided to the succession construct. Again, though concrete elements of evaluation are foundational within these procedures, the ministry of the Holy Spirit serves as the key element in providing God's plan for the church. The account of Simeon, Lucious, Manaem, Paul, and Barnabas in Acts 13 shares an example of the interactive work of the Holy Spirit with ministry leadership using the confirmation criteria. Confirmation uses various aspects of the candidate's life (or candidates' lives), the predecessor, and the church as a means of observing the intersecting and prophetic elements that demonstrate God's handiwork in the life of His people. It becomes apparent that God chooses to confirm His plans through the interconnected lives of people.

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### **communication**

The communication phase of the succession plan should give specific timeline to the process of preparing and presenting the plan church wide. A timeframe should take into consideration the necessary discussions, observations, and evaluations required to assure a good placement. It should include verbal, written, and modeled elements of informing those who initiate, those who interface, or those who are impacted by the anticipated transition. Communication will become increasingly important as the period of transition draws closer. Moore shares his account of pastoral succession and transition as he was leaving a ministry he planted in Southern California to begin a church plant in Hawaii. "The struggle seemed harder during those final months. I did not want to leave security, notoriety, good friends, and all that make home lovely. I began to loathe the insecurity, obscurity and uncertainty of life in another state."<sup>4</sup> The human perspectives will only realign by having a clearly communicated vision. The principle will guide the posture assumed by the succession team. The church will be able to observe the inevitable tension that facilitates change, but the church will also observe a deliberate course of action that focuses on the objective presented. Last, communication involves the various methodologies incorporated with sharing the development and updates of the succession transition. This may

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<sup>4</sup> Ralph Moore, *Let Go of the Ring*, (Honolulu, HI: Straight Street Publishing, 2000), 123.

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### **edification**

The edification phase brings emphasis to the importance of building the relationship between the predecessor and successor. This cannot be underestimated or minimized. The succeeding leader will only be able to experience healthy transition if the preceding pastor is willing to embrace and support the process. The simple statement, “I am proud of you and what I see the Lord doing in your life and ministry,” carries much weight and encouragement to those who God has called to lead. This is particularly true in the situation where a predecessor has served a long time within a local church. Emmy-nominated studio analyst and winning coach Tony Dungy shares, “Encouragement is the fuel that powers our efforts to engage, educate, and equip. Nothing does more to lubricate the rough spots than a good dose of encouragement.”<sup>5</sup> The predecessor must assume the role of being the single-most encourager to not only the new leader, but also to the process overall. The modeling of encouragement will provide enormous support during both the planning and the post-transitional period.

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### **ratification**

Many variables contribute to the ratification process of selecting and placing a new pastor. This is due largely in part to the various governance guidelines of churches. Denominational churches will refer to the ecclesiastical guidelines presented by the governing denomination. Some churches rely upon the pastor or the pastoral search committee to make a recommendation. Following a formal recommendation, the pastoral candidate is presented to the congregation for either a vote or a ratification presentation.

### **celebration**

The period of celebration denotes that a thorough and planned assessment has been implemented. The assessment, affirmation, confirmation, communication, edification, and ratification has presented a succession candidate that has been vested, and the predecessor, the church, and the successor can now celebrate God’s provision to the congregation. Such celebration should be inclusive of celebrating the departing pastor appropriately and generously. The congregation should balance the emotion of letting go of one leader with the excitement of receiving

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<sup>5</sup> Tony Dungy, *The Mentoring Leader*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2010), 177.

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the new pastor. This celebration phase may involve sending the predecessor and spouse on a trip, financially honoring the pastor, or holding a banquet at the conclusion of the pastor's ministry tenure. Holding a reception involving community leaders would welcome the new pastor and spouse to the faith community as a new senior leader among the community clergy. Welcome letters may be solicited from civic leaders, businesses, fellow clergy, and the congregational members. These same individuals may also express their gratitude to the predecessor. The goal is to provide honor to pastors who have led, as well as to honor those who will lead well (I Timothy 5:17–22).

### **then there was no plan at all**

266 The benefit of having a defined pastoral succession plan is often overlooked until tragic events warrant careful reconsideration. A 1500-member congregation in Sacramento, California, recently experienced the challenge of not having a succession plan in place. During a period of tremendous growth and ministry expansion, the fifty-four-year-old senior pastor passed away suddenly of a massive heart attack, leaving the congregation without any idea of who would lead the congregation. Although a week of commendable coverage and memorializing of his passing took place, the absence of a contingency plan quickly consumed the focus of the church leadership. Another global mission leader also recently passed away at age fifty-four, leaving the global mission organization he founded without any clear directive to what should happen if he were no longer able to serve. Sadly, the board of directors for the mission group had to dissolve the organization, because there was no evident successor to lead the ministry. In both instances, the absence of a successor left both groups in an emotional and logistical whirlwind. Their legacy is noted for the commendable life that they lived, but their legacy stops short of providing sustainability of what they sacrificed so greatly to impart. Vancil shares, "What will be your legacy? If you do a great job in developing your successor, part of your legacy will be that you were a leader who took the high road and worked to ensure that your organization would become even more successful after your departure."<sup>6</sup> The legacy of sustainability should accompany the profile of any pastor serving a commendable work. Buildings and ministry programs bless people and serve a tremendous purpose, but the replication of healthy leadership blesses and serves generations.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard F. Vancil, *Passing the Baton: Managing the Process of CEO Succession* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1987), 1.

## **Lovelace: Planning and Implementing Successful Pastoral Succession five factors that can derail a healthy succession plan**

Five elements can hinder the facilitation of an orchestrated pastoral succession plan. They are as follows:

1. Senior pastor stays in position too long.
2. Limited selection pool of healthy pastoral leaders.
3. An unhealthy or traumatized congregation due to moral failure or financial mishandling within a congregation.
4. Denominational structure does not support succession-planning processes within the local church level (e.g., bishop reassigns current pastoral leadership and appoints new pastors).
5. The financial resources of the local church are not designed to provide needed support for the predecessor that is retiring or unable to serve for other viable reasons.

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### **the center of praise story**

The idea for a strategic succession plan for the senior pastor role at the Center of Praise Ministries, Sacramento, California, has been forged with a belief that, “Success without a Successor is failure” (a notable quote by John Maxwell). The Center of Praise has reached a place of respectability, stability, and communal strength under a pastoral leadership of twenty-five years. Plans are set to continue enriching the community with disciple-making initiatives, including church planting from within the mother congregation.

In the summer of 2010, the senior pastor and various leaders discussed the need to begin a pastoral succession plan as a means of securing the well-being of the church’s future. In April of 2012, the senior pastor met a thirty-six-year-old church planter who had planted a small congregation two years earlier. During a brief conversation, the senior pastor exchanged contact information and provided a prayer of encouragement to the young leader. One month later, the senior pastor received a phone call from the man requesting an acquaintance meeting. During the initial conversation, the younger pastor asked if the senior pastor would provide support to him as a mentor. The subsequent meetings over the next several months served as a time of encouragement and prayer support for the church planter. Six months later, during a period of closing prayer, the senior pastor discerned that there was potentially a deeper purpose. During that time, the senior pastor asked the young man to prayerfully consider beginning the process to become the successor of the pastoral role at the Center of Praise. The church

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planter conferred with his wife and agreed to begin the process. The church planter was asked to share a sermon for the congregation at one of the evening services. This particular setting drew confirmation from four elders of the congregation who shared that the Holy Spirit had led them to believe that they should consider the young pastor as successor of the senior pastor. This period of confirmation allowed the process to move forward with a comprehensive assessment. It should be noted that the elders that gave confirmation provided feedback to the senior pastor unbeknownst to one another. Once they fully provided the confirmation, they completely engaged the process of assessment.

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The senior pastor requested a full background check, ministry and employment background, and educational review. During this time, the senior pastor and young mentee continued to meet weekly for periods of affirmation and edification. Both viewed these weekly one- to two-hour meetings as critical opportunities to discuss interpersonal matters and concerns. Though informal, they gave these meetings top priority for the purpose of continuing the assessment phase and providing opportunities of building trust. In addition, they gave key staffs the opportunity to meet with the candidate, aside from the senior pastor, to inquire and provide their personal feedback regarding the qualifications of a pastor. The senior pastor collaborated extensively with the staff members and elders as a means of encouraging transparency and openness within the discussions. They provided the candidate a role description of both a pastoral assistant and that of a senior pastor. Second, they provided the pastoral candidate a detailed timeline, outlining the scope and timeline of the evaluative and transitioning process. To provide daily observation, the church planter was asked to relinquish pastoral duties of his church plant and become the assistant pastor of Center of Praise Ministries. Again, the idea was to provide opportunities by which the pastor could work alongside the senior pastor and experience and acknowledge the culture of the church and the trends of the predecessor.

The assessment period proved to be incredibly successful, allowing the church leadership to begin communicating the intentional planned succession. Methods of communication involved sharing preaching duties and placing the picture of the young pastor and his spouse on any materials in which the senior pastor and spouse represented the church (i.e. church bulletin, website, and all church advertisements). The senior pastor began to make verbal reference of the young man as a means of affirming and acquainting the congregation with him. The senior pastor also began to share the planned succession with other fellow clergy at a regional gathering of pastors, with the desire that the city pastors would offer prayer support through the transition.

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During the period of communicating to others the deliberate approach to succession planning, the senior pastor and pastor of consideration sought to keep open discussion regarding the fears, the concerns, the excitement, and the areas of intimidation, as well as what each anticipated moving forward. This allowed the edification of both men, through mutual support and daily encouragement.

Currently, the succession plan is within its second of three-year process. Those involved have made great strides to present the plan in a positive and educational fashion. Many have stated that it is uncharted territory. However, most likely, the congregation will present the young pastor formally in one year for ratification. After the formal ratification of the congregation, a special celebration will commemorate the twenty-five-year leadership of the predecessor. The preceding pastor will serve the remainder of the calendar year, and then the church will hold a special installation service. The predecessor will lead the installation, and all of the elders will offer prayer, through the laying on of hands and words of encouragement to the newly installed pastor and his spouse. Prior to this event will be a community reception that will host church and civic leaders from throughout the region as they offer their congratulatory messages to the new pastor.

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The outgoing pastor will leave for a designated period of one to three months. This absence is designed to encourage a bonding period with the new leader and a time of reflection and refreshment for the former senior pastor. The plan is for the former pastor to return in the role of advocacy and support for the new senior pastor. The new leader will benefit from the role of his predecessor as private confidant and public fan. They will present in writing the agreement made in verbal conversation that the full intent of the outgoing senior pastor is to serve at the pleasure of the new pastor and the church advisory council. The church leader has been gracious to designate the title “founding pastor” to the outgoing senior pastor. The founding pastor will assist with weddings, funerals, and serve on the teaching team of the church. He will also provide direct oversight to the capital giving campaign, designed to eliminate the current property mortgages. The church leadership’s willingness to provide nearly eighty to ninety percent of the current salary, once the current senior pastor transitions, affirms this plan. The leadership has also committed to assuring that the succeeding pastor will be compensated in a generous manner.

### conclusion

Every church will ultimately experience a form of succession. The question is not when but how they implement the succession. A definitive plan and presentation of

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 5, Iss. 2 [2014], Art. 8 constructs that provide strong support for the predecessor, the successor, and the congregation equally drives the desire to see the perpetuation of healthy ministry and leadership. From a contemporary perspective, this discussion of succession is new territory. However, biblical precedent affirms that God's heart is that leaders lead His church well. He still provides shepherds that carry His heart for the people (Jeremiah 3:15). The deliberate planning and implementation of a healthy pastoral succession plan serves as an opportunity for the church to grow in number and in maturity. It models principles that transform congregations into healthy church ministries, advancing the kingdom of God.

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Bishop Parnell M. Lovelace Jr. serves as the founding and senior pastor of the Center of Praise Ministries, a congregation of 3300 weekly attendees in Sacramento, California. He is the CEO of the Cushite Network, a national training organization designed to equip and engage African-American senior pastors and church planters. Parnell served as a certified social worker and advocate for diverse populations within the child welfare and medical health field for fifteen years. He has earned an A.A. degree (American River College), Bachelor of Social Work (Oral Roberts University), Master of Social Work (University of Oklahoma), Master of Practical Theology (Oral Roberts University), and a D. Min. degree with an emphasis of Leadership and Church Growth at Talbot School of Theology (Biola University).