

The Five Year Pastoral Succession Plan

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October 14, 2008

One of the key tasks of a leader is to help the organization plan for the transition of leadership. I came to Chilson Hills May 1, 1979. With the exception of a one year sabbatical (per Edith Zimmerly) and two three month sabbaticals, I have served as your pastor all that time. With the celebration (?) of my 60th birthday many people at Chilson have begun to talk about my retirement. I think this is causing anxiety within the organization. Hence, it is time to openly talk about a succession plan. The Five Year Pastoral Succession Plan that I am detailing in the rest of this paper is based upon the assumption and hope that Jamie and I will continue to be blessed with good health and that our mothers will not need us to take on major caretaking roles. This plan has been unanimously approved by the Personnel Team, The Diaconate, and The Executive Ministry Team. It is being submitted to the congregation for approval as the process by which Chilson will proceed over the next five years.

The Five Year Pastoral Succession Plan

This plan is somewhat new and can be considered experimental. The plan has been ‘tried out’ in some congregations across the country with mixed success. The metaphor I think best helps describe this plan comes from normal family life. When a young person in a family decides to be married, the parents take a second place to the new love relationship. The newly married couple has a new relationship that takes time to learn how to be together. The parents stay in connection, but do not become involved in the day to day issues of the new relationship.

The assumptions of this new way of pastoral succession are as follows:

1. The Congregation knows its vision, mission, and values, and wishes to continue in the same direction as it is going with the current pastor.
2. The retiring pastor and the new pastor must be willing and able to move into new relationships where each is respected and supported. In short, both persons have to have their egos in check.
3. The Congregation is healthy enough to respect the new pastoral relationship with the new leader. (“We always did it this way with David” will NOT work!!!)
4. The continuing relationships with the retiring pastor need to be honored in a way that makes sure the American Baptist Minister’s Council Code of Ethics is respected.
5. The retiring pastor must have other interests outside the congregation to enable the new pastor to move in with freedom to lead.

This 5 year succession plan will look like this:

- The Pastor, Personal Team, Deacons, and Executive Team in collaboration will decide on the time to create a Pulpit Committee.
- The Pulpit committee will be formed by the church following the Chilson Hills Constitution. “**Section 4 - Pulpit Committee** When the Executive Ministry Team shall deem it necessary it shall recommend to the Church for approval, a chairperson and six additional persons to form a Pulpit Committee. The Pulpit Committee should consist of one member of each of the following: The Deaconate, Children’s Ministry Team, Youth Ministry Team, Executive Ministry Team, a youth representative of voting age (16 years), and a Member at Large. It shall be the duty of this Committee to secure and recommend to the Church a desirable candidate for the pulpit. The Pulpit Committee, in response to clear biblical teaching must consider candidates with no preference to gender, race, or ethnic background. The Church shall give no consideration to any candidate who is not first recommended to the Church by the Pulpit Committee.”
- The Pastor will have access to the deliberations of the Pulpit Committee as a consultant to the process.
- The appropriate American Baptist staff person will be invited to work with the Pulpit Committee to help in training.
- The current Pastor will stay in place doing the job of Senior Pastor while the search process takes place. (12 to 24 months)
- The new Pastor will be called to a Co-Pastorate of not less than 6 months and not more than 2 years. During this time the work of the Pastor will be shared between the co-pastors.
- At an agreed upon time (again in consultation with the Personnel Team, the Deacons, and the Executive Ministry Team) the Retiring Pastor will be honored as Pastor Emeritus and the new Pastor will be declared the Senior Pastor.
- The Pastor Emeritus will maintain membership at Chilson and will support the Senior Pastor in every way.
- The Church will begin immediately to plan for the financial implications of this plan.

Are there other ways of pastoral transition?

There are other transition plans used by different churches. In the United Methodist Church with the itinerant plan in a connectional church setting the pastor comes and goes every 3 to 15 years at the direction of the Bishop.

In the congregational churches (Presbyterian, Lutheran, Congregational, Baptist) the common model of pastoral succession in the last half of the 20th Century was a more career model based upon individual decision making. I summarize that model below.

- The common plan involves the pastor making the decision to leave or the church asking the pastor to leave the church. Usually there is a one or two month transition period after

which the pastor will leave the congregation. At that end point the departing pastor leaves the congregation and does not return for anything. The American Baptist Code of Ethics which each pastor signs and agrees to live by says: *I will, upon my resignation or retirement, sever my ministerial leadership relations with my former constituents, and will not make ministerial contacts in the field of another ministerial leader without his/her request and/or consent.*

- Once the letter of resignation is received by the Church a pastoral search committee is established by the church according to the directives of the church constitution.
- The appropriate oversight body works with the Pulpit committee to hire an Interim Pastor who will serve for the 12-24 months it will take to bring the new pastor on board.
- Usually a person from the denominational office works with the Pulpit committee to provide training and congregational support. The assumption is that the church will need to work through their grief at the loss of the pastor and re-envision its future to get ready for the new pastor.
- The costs of the Pulpit Committee and the moving costs of the new pastor are usually taken from the savings of not paying a full salary to the Interim Minister.