

Changing Pastors without a Church Melt-down - Rich Toliver

Introduction

Through the course of over 40 years of pastoral ministry it has been my privilege to pastor 3 churches for various lengths of time ranging from 2½ years to 31 years. In all three churches I was called as their pastor by what is probably the most culturally accepted and commonly expected practice in most independent fellowships in the U.S. I came from outside the church fellowship and was known by no one in two of the churches and less than five people in the other. Other than hearing a couple of tapes, reading a resume and calling two or three references that I had listed, 99% of the leadership and congregation knew relatively little about me. Oh yes, and they did see a picture of me and my family, so they knew we were not likely to be aliens from Mars or thereabouts.

When we arrived in town we were treated well by all three groups, and began a gauntlet of speaking engagements, Q&A times, fellowship dinners, meetings with elders and deacons, meals with individuals in the church, and as many other creative get-acquainted times that could be conjured up. Did they know me well by the end of that extended weekend? Really? Would you even ask such a question and not know the answer?

Realistically, the overarching factors in choosing a pastor in such a pressure cooker environment are those of how favorable an impression the individual and family create with their people skills along with the prospective pastor's perceived preaching ability formulated in a period of approximately three days.

Most churches don't really know what kind of testimonies the prospective pastors they are calling have in their previous churches or communities. How they treat God's sheep is a relative unknown. Whether they practice what they preach is a mystery. The candidate could be behind in paying his bills to every merchant in his old town and the new congregation would not know the difference. In short, what churches don't know about prospective pastors is generally far greater than what they do know.

My purpose today is to challenge you to at least consider a paradigm shift in the matter of how you choose a new pastor to fill your pulpit if you are currently "resigned to the normal practice". Have you ever thought it might be better to call someone that you already know well and trust? Wouldn't it be better to call someone who already loves the people in that local fellowship of believers and who is loved by them? Why not call someone that you know what kind of testimony they have in the church family and the local community?

Unless you can think of a magical way of doing so, let me suggest that perhaps it is time more churches begin to cultivate, nurture and raise up as pastors from the gifted men in their own fellowships rather than calling relative unknowns from every other corner of our land instead of their own.

Perhaps the thought has crossed your mind, “If you are proposing such a paradigm shift, how is it that you speak from a standpoint of personal experience in the matter if you were called by three fellowships in the traditional way?” Over the past 5 years our fellowship has experienced the pastoral transition with a “grow your own” kind of pastor. It has been my privilege to be a part of that milestone in our fellowship. After serving as Senior Pastor for 29 years I became the Associate Pastor while my former Associate Pastor became my Senior Pastor. Yes, we encountered quite a few skeptics when we bounced such an endeavor off our peers, but it has proven to be a great blessing to our local church family, to our local church family, to me personally, and to the new Senior Pastor as well (although you will have Pastor Jeff about that).

One of the big factors given by smaller churches like ours for following the traditional approach is that we often don't have the money to hire an associate or assistant. While that may be true, don't you think it possible that the Lord could send along someone that doesn't need a full-time salary for you to mentor?

Brady Farr was our youth pastor for a time before he became an assistant pastor at BBC. During that season of our relationship he taught junior high math in a local public school and received only a small stipend from the church. How did that work with him keeping regular office hours? It didn't. He didn't keep regular office hours and in fact was only rarely in the office. We didn't require of him the same responsibilities you might require of a full or part time staffer. During the time Brady was a youth pastor he and I met together for regular times of study and fellowship. We worked through 2 basic theology courses and other subjects as well.

In time, Brady came to be an associate pastor and stayed with us for 11 years. I believe our fellowship would have been willing to entrust Brady with senior pastor responsibilities if I had been closer to the time of stepping down from senior pastor. He also would have done an excellent job as Pastor Jeff Griffis has done! But instead Brady became a pastor at Mountain View Bible Church in Johannesburg, SA. So, I guess that works too, don't you?

A Mentor in the New Testament

The New Testament has some very good examples of mature men mentoring men who are younger in the faith. Probably everyone reading this article is well-aware of Jesus' Advanced Mentoring Program. In the New Testament Jesus simply called some men to follow Him. Their names were as follows: Peter, James, John, Andrew, Bartholomew or Nathanael, James, the Lesser or Younger, Jude or Thaddeus, Matthew or Levi, Philip, Simon the Zealot, Thomas, Judas.

Many observations could be made about Jesus raising up of the disciples but here are just a few.

a) These men were not Bible college or Seminary graduates but fishermen, tax collectors, and the like. I am not depreciating Bible College or Seminary educations in the least and am thankful for the privilege of attending such, but you can function without a degree. In truth the apostles attended Jesus' Bible College/ Seminary. Your prospective replacement

doesn't have to begin as a shining example of expository preaching and deep theological foundations. However, through the course of mentoring men there must also be a focus on content and not just relationships.

b) Mentoring is a process not an instantaneous, miraculous endowment with spiritual maturity and fully developed spiritual gifts. Remember you didn't become spiritually mature and have your teaching and preaching gifts fully developed the moment you became a believer and functioned as a "baby Christian." It will take a lot of time and effort on your part to be a developer of mature pastors and church leaders.

c) The path to spiritual maturity will be a twisting one with many highs and lows along the way and with every individual developing differently than the next.

d) Not all of those you undertake to mentor will succeed. Some will falter. Some will quit. Judas didn't fare so well! I have had men lose interest and quit, others changed their theology later, and some just weren't a good fit for spiritual leadership in the church.

Mentioned in List of Character Traits

The list of character traits desirable in a church leader demonstrates that we may well want to reevaluate how we call a new pastor.

1Ti 3:2-7 (NIV) - 2 Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4 He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. 5 (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. 7 He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

The following questions arise from this passage for the church calling a pastor from outside:

- 1) When you call a man from outside do you truly know his testimony and whether he is above reproach where he is now or has been?
- 2) Do you really know the condition of his marriage? You can be fooled, and many have been!
- 3) Do you know if he demonstrates self-control or is a hot-tempered man?
- 4) Hospitality? Does he display it?
- 5) Able to teach? We may have an idea about his teaching, but he might only have a half dozen sermons that he studied for when he was in Bible College.
- 6) Ever worked with an argumentative man on a board? Is this man, whom you have never seen before and will only be around for 3 days and talk to a couple of his close friends or favorable references, argumentative?
- 7) Is he hung up on money and how to make more of it? Is he a lover of silver?
- 8) You may have a hint of what his family is like and whether his kids are well disciplined or not but sometimes candidates don't even bring their kids with them (or at least part of them). So, does he "manage his own family well?"
- 9) A good reputation with outsiders??? What do this man's neighbors where he lives now think of him? What do people in his town think of him? Merit of Time There is definite

mention in the New Testament of being confident that we are very well acquainted with the new Pastor or church leader.

1 Timothy 5:22 (NIV) Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure. “quickly”- (quick);

(1) as qualifying an action quickly, at once, without delay;

(2) as qualifying time- soon;

(3) in an unfavorable sense hastily, with too much haste -- Friberg

What is Paul referring to here with the “laying on of hands”? He appears to be speaking about a public commissioning of elders to their office. These verses are not likely to be three disjointed thoughts but rather three connected thoughts in the matter of raising up leaders, elders, pastors.

Most of us would without hesitation say this is the standard by which we are to appoint elders in our fellowships. While I whole-heartedly agree, I would also submit to you that pastoral candidates fit in that same category. When you initially went to your first church, was the church “hasty in laying on hands” on you? On appointing or commissioning you for service?

I am not suggesting this as the only way to a successful pastoral transition, or that we did not have some bumps along the way. You may find yourself in a situation that doesn't fit this model. But it does seem better to me, in the providence and provision of God, to at least consider such a model rather than calling a relatively unknown from someplace else to become our senior leader in the fellowship.

Conclusion Some weeks ago, I was made aware of a pastoral situation in which the Senior Pastor of a church was about to turn 75 years-old. He has said he would step down as Senior Pastor at that time and has every intention to do so. The church has one young man in the church that might someday be in a place where he would be a good candidate for leadership, but at present they have nothing in place. The young man has no preparation or training for pastoral leadership either in Bible College, Seminary or in the local church. That pastor has been there for over 40 years in a church that seems to have good body-life. But the church has not really laid any groundwork to speak of for the next Senior Pastor. The fellowship is about to enter what will feel like “stepping in a black hole.” I hear of those kinds of scenarios quite regularly, and so do you. What are you doing to prepare your predecessor???