

## Thoughts on Succession:

1. All on line, so no need to take notes ... pic up a business card, go to church website, click on "Council Notes"
2. Format? 20-25 minute presentation; Q and A with my friends who are in fact my Sabbath group. 2x's a year for the past 6 or so years. Rich and rewarding. I will feed them a few questions to prime the pump but the majority I hope will come from you.
3. Dr. Matthew Sleeth's book on Sabbath called 24/6. Mostly free ... Matthew would just like you to make whatever donation you want to the GCF.
4. And a shameless plug for my book on Joseph in the bookstore. All three of these guys have read it and John Soper got saved doing so ... tho' he had to read it twice. And all the profits from that go to the GCF so it's a good deal.

And now to succession. I have done it twice and I'm now doing it for the third time as I head off into retirement. And I have learned that one of the clearest Scriptural statements for a framework for succession comes from John 3:30, where JTB says of Jesus: "He must increase, I must decrease." Our task is to prepare the way for our successor and not be in the way.

You know, I never get asked to preach in my old churches (two). I am loved by them, I left them great shape, they continued to flourish after I was gone, but they express no interest to have me come back and preach.

From this I learned three things: (1) I must not have anything to say that is essential for them to hear. (2) I must not be necessary to their success. (3) I must need to be forgotten in some healthy way. And John 3:30 looks a lot like that. So the question is: are you willing to be forgotten? Just wondering.

So succession does not begin with what we must do but with who we are and who we will choose to be. And what does that chosen posture look like? Well, it begins with the fact that the transition is not about you. It is about the church and preparing the way for the one who comes after you so that the church you leave will flourish.

Hebrews tells us that Jesus is prophet, priest and king. Prophet, august spoke person for God. Priest, the holy intermediary. King, all authority in heaven and on earth.

But in John 12 some Greeks approach Phillip and ask if they can see Jesus. Jesus replies in effect, okay, its time now, now is the time for the Son of Man to be revealed for who he really is.

And he who is prophet, priest and king reveals who he is as none of those roles in Hebrews. What does he do? He washes the disciple's feet in John 13 and calls them to do the same. This is at the heart of *Jesus'* succession plan for his disciples: the posture is one of servanthood and the ones you are meant to be serving in your succession are the church and your successor.

So then question becomes can you embrace downward mobility? 54 AD ( I Cor. 15:9) "I am the least of the apostles." 60 AD (Eph. 3:8) "I am the least of the saints.) 62 AD (I Tim. 1:15) "I am the worst of sinners.)

The attitude required: Phil. 2 and the surrender of self and selfish ambition. According to the Elliott translation, it reads "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who though He existed in the form of Senior Pastor, did not consider that role as something to be grasped."

This is important whether you chose your exit or it was chosen for you. I have had the privilege of choosing my exits, though there were many times in hard seasons I would turn to my Marilyn and ask should we plant perennials or annuals in the garden? So for me succession was

about transferring my treasure ... like giving my children to someone else to raise. It was heart wrenching.

But for those how had their exit chosen for them, I have no doubt it was handled poorly and awkwardly and the wound it left was raw. You were not transferring your treasure. You were being delivered, really and the pain of that birthing process was scarring to be sure.

But no matter what the cause behind your exit, if we say we love the church, then we need die to ego needs or self-justification or the desire to be proven right, because all of that will only wound the church and cripple the entry of the new pastor. It is not about you or me or our legacy or putting our stamp on the church. It is about the ensuring the legacy of the church's DNA and vision go forward and making it possible for it to be picked up by the new person.

So let me say this about the use of authority. How will we use power? In Luke 15 the Father had all the power over the prodigal and he used it to love him not lord it over him. Your church will be vulnerable and fragile in ways you might not expect. Will you use your power to love them through the transition or use it entrench what you imagine your legacy to be? More on that a little later.

Interestingly for JTB, we find he has doubts about his successor. In Luke 7:19 while in prison he sends two of his disciples to Jesus to ask "are you the one or should we expect someone else?" I think doubts are a part of the succession pkg. And John, who preached to the poor but who healed no one, gets this reply from Jesus:

"Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

Application? Expect doubts and uncertainty. JTB and JC had this in common: the good news was proclaimed to the poor. But that is

where it ends. Jesus ministry was altogether different and altogether more.

Your successor will have a different ministry than you, maybe even more than yours. Sidebar question: if that happens, will you be able to rejoice in their success? But their ministry will be a different suit of clothes from yours, it will look different, and you might very well have doubts creep in because it is not how you would have done it.

You will be tempted to reach back and interfere, use some side door influence to get things done your way or save some pet program that is being discarded by the new person. Know this: the worst view in ministry is the one you take back over your shoulder. Don't reach back into yesterday or try to hold on to it out of some ego need or loss of status or whatever. Just as the church needs to heal and move on, you need to heal and move on. And if you don't leave well you won't enter well.

So don't stumble over those doubts and uncertainties: as long as the good news is still being preached to the poor, what that looks like after you are gone is not your worry.

We rest comfortably or uncomfortably in God's sovereignty on that one. The choice is yours. Because succession is not about continuity of gifts or personalities or programs but the continuity of God's Presence and the DNA of the church's ministry.

So here are a handful of principles to guide your process along with a few pieces of advice ... just a few things I have learned since I knew it all! Some do's, some don'ts and some unique things you might want to try.

**Do:** Speak well of your board, your staff and your leadership team ... express your confidence in them publically and often. That will build the trust levels in the church.

Do: Realize that time will go by faster than you think. E. E.

Cummings... I knew I would get old, I just thought it would take longer. And this: what you will miss most won't be your formal role but your informal one. I have a boy about ten who winks at me every Sunday as we pass each other in the hall. I am sure will miss that more than seeing my name on the bulletin.

Do: Speak well of the process and foster openness. I gave my board two years notice and my congregation 18 months. And I have spoken openly about it but tried not to get preoccupied with it. There is a balance there between openness and still doing the work of ministry as if you are never going to leave.

You can bridge the gap between leadership and followership with redundant communication: town hall (give people "a voice at the table" cards), we give updates on line and in the bulletin on how the search process is going, what the timeline looks like, etc.

And you have to make it safe to process the transition out loud. On a larger staff, staff alliances will shift. People will stop coming to you for advice. People will be making plans that do not include you. People will withdraw from you because they know you are leaving and it's early days of grief for them and hurts too much to lean in your direction knowing the relationship is ending. Be open about these things. Talk with your staff about them. Affirm how normal they are behaving in this circumstance.

Do: live out of your true self, not some sunny Sunday School projection of yourself. You need to be secure in who you are in JC and not try to secure your identity to your vocation. Paul: a tentmaker by vocation. Paul: an apostle of JC by calling. You could take away his vocation but

never his identity. So where you root your identity is crucial for how you navigate this transition.

So ... you write a letter, you get to the end, type your name, followed by a comma, and then you type what? Your role or your title or your position. That is all vocational stuff. Who you will be after the comma going forward is the important piece of your identity. And if you cannot be content with it now, you won't be content with it in your new context.

Do: give your church permission to love their new pastor. Publically release them to him in conversation, correspondence, and comments along the way. Count on the law of gravity: if they see acceptance and love in you for the next pastor it will trickle down to the church family.

Do: In your preaching and teaching and leadership, re-enforce the church's DNA. Stick to the key themes of your message.

Do: Host regular, focused prayer times on the succession, circulate prayer requests and directions on how people ought to be praying.

Do: Take your board through a book like "Next" by Warren Bird. It will answer a lot of questions and prepare them well. I have John Soper to thank for that lead. Three other good books are Transitions by William Bridges, Finishing Well by Bob Buford, Necessary Endings by Henry Cloud, and of course that remarkable book on Joseph everyone is talking about!

Do: a systems audit and tweak what needs to be tweaked. I had my new EP do that and we discovered overlap and some role adjustments in

admin that have been a real help. Someone with fresh eyes in your church family could likely do that for you just through observation.

Do: Push membership ... it sends a great message about belief in the church's future.

Do: A one year calendar for after you are gone, with weekly and monthly check lists, signature events, calendarize retreats, build the on ramps and built in prep time, who is responsible, who has institutional knowledge about the why's and wherefores of doing what we do: ie. HTE offering. This will provide in some measure for the absence of institutional knowledge that you take with you.

Do: Identify a supportive "keeper of the legend" as a resource person for your successor. EGR's have time on their hands and they will get to the new guy early and will skew some of his perceptions.

Do: Figure out who your point person is going to be for ministry distribution and follow up. And authorize them to do it. Put your blessing on them.

Do: Keep leading right to the end but invite the Board into your leadership role and begin giving them appropriate sovereignty over the key leadership responsibilities (many of which are currently yours) that will be required for the interim period. This is all about the right distribution of your power and influence. You must release your influence to those you can trust to steward it until it is given back to the new pastor.

Do: Have a key board member meet regularly with staff to monitor their wellness and to keep the vision on track.

Do: Post a contact “trouble shooting person” on line and/or in the bulletin so people know where to go for answers about the process.

Do: Keep your promises to the very end. To be a professional means to keep your promises. Keep yours.

Do: Avoid starting something new that you cannot finish ... some program you cannot see through to the end.

Do: When you leave, leave. Don't make promises you will never be able to keep like we'll always be friends, etc. That is not only untrue but it is impossible to keep.

And for those who are on the brink of retirement, do answer this question: who will you be after you are no longer needed? Will you have a life after your professional death?

Only a few don'ts ...

Don't: project the upon future a burden that is yours and no one else or meddle in the future and tie the hands of the one who follows you.

Don't: use your pulpit to explain your choices re: leaving. Give your key leaders talking points and stay on script

Don't: leave any brown bag problems for the next guy that you should deal with before you go. Don't undercut him by making him the ogre for

letting someone go in his early days, or solving a problem personality on the board or some conflict issue like program funding or budget stuff. Tie up as many loose strings as you can.

And a few unique things to try ...

My millennial preachers ... three of them on my staff. I have put together a preaching schedule that runs to the end of June 2018 and they are on it. I have assigned a preaching mentor to each of them.

My millennial puppies ... explain the puppies principle and their presence at board meetings.

My millennial mentoring groups. Work on a pool of emerging leaders to feed the system after you are gone. Two cohorts of ten each with the next leaders of the cohorts auditing the process.

And my last unique suggestion has to do with hiring practices: contracts. It is hard to hire someone who will work for someone else. But at the same time you don't want to retard ministry momentum by not hiring people or handicap the new person. 4 new hires in last 18 months all on contract. Two years plus a one year option. New guy gets the call when the contract is up: stay on or thank you very much.