

What Makes for a Healthy Leadership Transition?[Slide 1]

Either at the end of this year or next year a new Senior Pastor will come to take leadership over Hope Fellowship. In my annual State of the Church Address today, I thought I would talk about what makes for a healthy leadership transition.

For those of you who are relatively new to Hope Fellowship, allow me to bring you up to date. About three years ago I and the elders came to the conclusion that we should start implementing a transition plan to bring a new Senior Pastor to Hope Fellowship. The first major step in that transition plan was to pay off the church mortgage which at that time was about \$300,000 dollars by asking people to start giving to the debt reduction fund. We expected it to take three years to pay off the mortgage. We are actually going to pay off the mortgage in about two and a half years probably by the end of February or March of this year. The second step after the church mortgage was paid off was to form a Search Team and task it with leading us through the whole process of discovering our next Senior Pastor. We will probably form that team in a couple of months.

[Slide 2] At the end of the sermon I will share my own personal thoughts on this process, but first I want to look at some of the leadership transitions in the Bible to see what we can learn as to what makes for a healthy leadership transition. Specifically I would like us to consider four leadership transitions in the Bible. The four transitions I want us to consider are the transition from Jesus to his disciples, Moses to Joshua, Saul to David, and David to Solomon.

[Slide 3] First, let's state the obvious. Every leadership role must come to an end. Even Jesus, the leader par excellence, had to turn over leadership to someone else. This is necessary for God's sovereign will to be accomplished, so the question becomes what will make this leadership transition the best possible transition for God's people and his purposes?

[Slide 4] God sovereignly raises up and releases leaders. The Bible makes clear in each of the four examples I chose that God sovereignly determined that the transition must occur and he chose who would be the next leader. Let me describe briefly those four leadership transitions in chronological order.

[Slide 5] Moses was growing old when he brought the Israelites to the eastern side of the Jordan River and prepared them to enter the Promised Land. Because of an act of disobedience God had told Moses that he would not allow Moses to cross over into the Promised Land. God also told Moses who would be his successor: Joshua. Moses communicated all this information to the people of Israel in a speech in Deuteronomy 31:1-8. Let me read that speech to you. Read. God communicated to Moses that his leadership had come to an end and that Joshua would be the next leader.

[Slide 6] The next transition was from Saul to David. This is our example of what not to do in a leadership transition. God told Saul through the prophet Samuel that God was removing the kingship from Saul because of Saul's disobedience and that he was giving the right to rule to another man more worthy than Saul was. We know from the story that David is God's choice for the next king, although Saul doesn't know yet who his replacement is. Here is the conversation between Samuel and Saul, where Samuel reveals that God will remove Saul's leadership role from him. I'm reading from 1 Samuel 15:24-29. Read. God determined that Saul's rule should end and that David should replace him.

[Slide 7] The third leadership transition is between David and his son, Solomon. David is approaching death and God has determined that Solomon will be the next king and that Solomon will build the Temple instead of David. We see this in David's words to Solomon in 1 Chron. 22:6-10. Read. God determined that Solomon would succeed David and would build the great temple.

[Slide 8] Finally, in the transition from Jesus to the eleven disciples it is very clear that God has marked who is to succeed Jesus because Jesus prayed the whole night to the Father before he chose his disciples. Then Jesus communicated several times in advance that he was going to be put to death and rise from the dead. Finally Jesus told his disciples on the night of his arrest that it was necessary for his leadership to end and for their leadership to begin. Let's read what he says in John 16:7-13. Read.

In all of these leadership transitions, God makes it clear that he is in charge. He raises up leaders and determines the length of their leadership and then raises up the next leader. The same God who brought me here to Hope Fellowship a little less than 22 years ago will also bring the next Senior Pastor. I kind of think he did a pretty good job the last time. We can trust that he will do a good job this time.

[Slide 9] What makes for a good leadership transition? What can you and I do so that this will be a very healthy change for Hope Fellowship? The first thing that makes for a healthy transition is the present leader's willingness to let go. He must accept the change. The transition between Jesus and his disciples, between Moses and Joshua, and between David and Solomon were all healthy transitions based upon what happened to God's people during those transitions.

The transition between Moses and Joshua was pretty seamless. Moses accepted the reality of his ministry's end letting Joshua take over and lead the Israelites into the Promised Land.

Saul resisted God's plan to install David as king. Ten years went by as Saul fought to hold onto the throne by constantly chasing David, trying to kill him. Saul did not cooperate with God with the result that the nation had to endure ten years of mismanagement by Saul. Because Saul resisted God's plan he inspired his followers to do the same so that when Saul fell in battle, his army commander Abner tried to install Saul's son Ish-bosheth as the new king leading to a civil war between David and his people and the remnants of Saul's army. The Israelites suffered greatly during this time because Saul would not accept God's termination of his leadership role.

David was approaching the end of his life when he heard that one of his other sons, Adonijah was claiming the crown, so David ordered the priests to anoint Solomon as king while David was still alive to make sure that God's choice of Solomon was established. David supported God's plan by abdicating the throne to Solomon, and thus Solomon's rule was established without a civil war.

Jesus fully accepted his role to prepare his disciples to lead in his place after he was crucified. He spent at least three years preparing his replacements, resulting in a leadership transition that catapulted the church forward.

[Slide 10] Included in accepting the change in leadership, the outgoing leader should prepare for the success of the next leader. In the three success stories we've looked at, the outgoing leader paved the way for the success of the next leader. Moses presented Joshua publicly to the whole congregation of Israel and declared that God would use Joshua to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land, thereby giving Joshua a public stamp of approval. So in case it is not already clear, I am giving my stamp of approval on this whole plan to bring forth a new Senior Pastor.

God forbid David from building the Temple, so you know what David did to help Solomon succeed as a new king? David had all the materials for building the temple gathered and stored,

ready to go when Solomon decided to build the temple. David did a lot of the hard work of preparation beforehand so that Solomon's task would be much easier.

Before I came here, Hope Fellowship had an intentional interim pastor who did that for me. Pastor Kent Krakowian helped the church write by-laws, formulate its mission, and work through outstanding conflicts, so that when I arrived here, all that hard work was done. I understand and fully appreciate the blessing a former leader can pass onto the next leader by doing some of the preparation work in advance of his coming.

Our constitution and by-laws are in good shape. We do need to update our policies manual which we will do this next year before the new man comes. We will have paid off the church mortgage providing some more flexibility in our budget going forward. There are no major church conflicts unresolved. We've developed a core of leaders and teachers and a discipling culture that will be very beneficial to him. I'm certainly committed to handing off the church in the best possible shape to the next person.

Jesus prepared for the success of his disciples by discipling them for three years. He equipped them with training and with experience to draw upon once they were left in charge. Moses, David and Jesus all did things to position the next leader for success.

Pastors develop a special love for their people, as I have for you. And I know it's reciprocal. It's hard to let that go because Christian fellowship and camaraderie, when it is good, is ever so sweet and fulfilling. I understand the temptation to hold onto it even past the time. Leaders lose their effectiveness. There comes a time when they don't have what the people most need. I think one of the kindest things a leader can do for his people is to save them from ever having to say, "We think it's time for a change." It's always better if the leader says it rather than the people have to say it. This is the first requirement for a healthy transition: the leader's willingness to let go.

[Slide 11] The second thing necessary for a healthy transition is the people's willingness to accept the transition. They're willingness to accept the transition is often related directly to the current leader's willingness to accept the change.

The Israelites willingly accepted Joshua as the new leader. They marched to war under his commands. David caused potential problems for Solomon and Israel because he married multiple wives and had multiple heirs, but he solved the problem he created by abdicating the throne and turning it over to Solomon while David was still alive. Thus the people accepted Solomon as the rightful king. Jesus' eleven original disciples plus Matthias became apostles and key leaders of the early church. The church accepted them as Christ's designates.

As we have already seen, many Israelites did not accept David as king after Saul's death. They wanted to follow the pattern of a monarchy by installing Saul's closest of kin as the next king. Civil war ensued and only after military victory did David achieve the crown which God had promised him. The Israelites resisted God's plan and it caused bloodshed.

[Slide 12] So you have a responsibility to help make this transition a healthy one. You must accept the new leader for who he is and allow him to be different. Leadership transitions happen because you need a different kind of leader. What the Israelites needed going into the Promised Land was a proven warrior, a battle commander who could successfully lead them in a war-time scenario. They needed a Joshua, not a Moses. With Saul and David, the Israelites needed a godly king who truly sought God, versus Saul who at heart disobeyed God. With the passing of David, the Israelites no longer needed a warrior king who would keep expanding their borders. They needed a wise king who would consolidate all of David's gains and manage them well.

The church no longer needed the supreme leader Jesus on the earth. Instead it needed countless smaller Jesus's filled with the Holy Spirit who could rapidly multiply the church and go forth to make disciples of all nations. Change happens because something new is needed.

The next pastor needs to be different to meet the future challenges this church will face. Don't compare him against me. Let him be who God made him to be. Trust that God will work through the search process to bring exactly the right person who needs to lead Hope Fellowship.

[Slide 13] Not only must you accept him, you must follow him. You must support his efforts. No leader can lead without people willing to follow. For a healthy transition, you must be willing to change.

[Slide 14] The third characteristic for a healthy transition is that everyone needs to put the mission above the man. The mission is what is important. The man is important to the extent that he helps you fulfill the mission. Israel's mission with Joshua was to conquer and take possession of the Promised Land. The mission dictated that Joshua should lead and Moses should not.

The mission for David and Israel was to establish a godly king and kingdom, and although David had his moments of failure, he was a man after God's own heart, a man whom God could use to lead his people to seek God. The mission for the church was and is to make disciples of all nations. The leadership structure had to change to facilitate that mission. No longer could it be a central hierarchy led by one person: Jesus. Now it needed to be a fluid state of rapidly multiplying teams of leaders who were empowered by the Holy Spirit. Hope Fellowship's mission is to make a difference in the Brazosport Community and in the world by winning, building and equipping reproducing disciples of Jesus Christ. We have never been that great at winning. That happens to also be one of my weaknesses. Perhaps what we need is someone to help the church improve in that part of our mission.

The question we must constantly ask as we go through this process is: What is the best person, best thing to fulfill the mission God has given our church. The mission takes precedence over the man. Even when we consider different candidates, the question to ask is: Will this person help us better achieve the mission we have been given.

These three things need to be in place for a healthy leadership transition. The leader's willingness to let go, the people's willingness to accept the change, and everyone's willingness to put the mission above everything else.

[Slide 15] Now, let me close with my personal thoughts. Why did I feel like my time is ending here at Hope Fellowship? About five years ago our numbers were declining and we had hardly any young families. At the time the elders and I talked about the reality that as an older man I would not as easily attract younger families, but we decided to first try and add younger staff to see if that made a difference, and if not, then I felt I should think about leaving. Adding younger staff has helped somewhat but our numbers remain not much different.

I've also realized that I don't have the same drive and energy as I used to have particularly when it comes to strategic leadership such as exploring new community outreach opportunities, implementing new ministry direction, etc. I still greatly enjoy the preaching, discipling, managing and pastoring aspects of the Senior Pastor role but I'm tired of trying to attempt new things. I've run out of ministry ideas and I think you need someone to come in with fresh ideas and new eyes to see the possibilities before us. So much of the Brazosport Community is unreached for Christ and we have all these contractors living here and people moving in, but we're not making a dint in those opportunities. I feel like there is so much we could be doing,

but what that is escapes me. I feel like the church needs someone else who can lead in new ways.

[Slide 16] As a result of these considerations, I and the elders implemented the staff transition plan which we are pursuing. Originally, I thought that I might could stay on in a part time position for maybe a year after the new pastor arrived, serving maybe as an equipping pastor focusing on discipling, the life groups, etc. I thought by going part time and by freeing up the church from making the mortgage payments that we might be able to financially swing that.

However after more thought and reflection I don't think that's a good idea. We would easily be spending 60% of our budget on staff if we bring in a pastor while I cut back to 30 hours to maintain the insurance. I don't think 60% spending on staff is a healthy situation. That leaves little room to cut back in lean times if that much of your budget is in staff and by all measures our church already has more staff than the typical church our size. When going to two services failed to produce any substantial increase in our numbers, it became very apparent to me that barring some kind of financial miracle, that it simply was not reasonable for me to stay.

At this point what I am assuming is that I will stay until the church hires the next Senior Pastor and then leave about a month before he arrives. My best guess at this point is that I will seek to serve as an interim pastor for other churches that are between pastors. That way I can do what I do best: teach, manage, and pastor without being responsible for visionary leadership. However, the Lord may have me do something else that I haven't even considered. I'm trying to stay open to whatever possibilities might exist.

I'm not retiring, but I think I am slowing down. I don't know that I believe in retirement from the Lord's work, but I do look forward to maybe more time for travel to see the kids and grandkids, maybe more time to focus on my writing career, and maybe some more time for fishing.

We will consult with our District Superintendent, Bob Rowley, to plan out a good process for the congregation as we search for a new pastor. We'll plan a Concert of Prayer to pray for the process, probably have some kind of focus groups to discuss what we should have in the next pastor, and form a Search Team. Once the Search Team is formed, it is reasonable to expect to have a new Senior Pastor anywhere from 9 months to a year-and-a half.

I will do whatever I can to help us have a great transition. This is the Lord Jesus' church. We all need to work together so that it is all he wants it to be.