

THE ART OF SEAMLESS PASTORAL TRANSITION:

A GUIDE FOR CHURCH LEADERS

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A DOCTORAL PAPER

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

2022

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The New Revised Standard Version®.

Humility Modeled at Community Church

Community Church is part of an historic Pentecostal tradition that is described not as a denomination but as a “voluntary cooperative fellowship.” Hence, there is no required process that Community Church must follow for pastoral transitions, nor is there a denominational executive that oversees pastoral transitions at Community Church. The church is independent and self-governing and has its own set of by-laws to govern leadership succession.

When the Outgoing Pastor reached his early 60s, he prayerfully determined that a Seamless Pastoral Transition was in the best interests of the church. He was the Founding Pastor of Community Church, and under his 30-year tenure as pastor, the church had grown into a vital congregation of approximately 750 members. In partnership with the church Board of Directors, the Outgoing Pastor chose an Associate Pastor of Community Church to become his successor.

The Incoming Pastor had faithfully served the church for more than 15 years in various roles when he was approached about taking on the role of Lead Pastor. Through his time as Associate Pastor, the Incoming Pastor had been given the opportunity to develop as a leader and demonstrate his leadership effectiveness, including providing the pastoral leadership for a second location/campus of Community church. He had stepped up to the challenge and was sincerely admired by church members.

The Outgoing Pastor and the Incoming Pastor worked together to create a two-year plan that would culminate with a formal transition. During that two year time, the Incoming Pastor was given the title of “Co-Lead Pastor” to signal to the congregation that his role had changed and that he was about to take on the formal Lead Pastor role. During the final year, he preached during 50% of the weekend services at Community Church. With the Incoming Pastor having received an overwhelmingly positive congregational vote to take on the role of Lead Pastor, the Seamless Pastoral Transition at Community Church took place with no loss of momentum.

One of the keys to the successful Seamless Pastoral Transition at Community Church was that both the Outgoing Pastor and Incoming Pastor modeled humility. They both committed early on to demonstrate mutual honor and approach the transition with deference to one another. They met regularly and had open discussions about their working relationship and the importance of a smooth succession. When either felt that their toes were stepped on, they talked it through.

Modeling humility was not easy. As the Founding Pastor who had served the church for over 30 years, the Outgoing Pastor had reached a point where the daily expressions of love and respect he received from the congregation were highly desirable. While he was happy to choose a successor and acknowledge that

a transition would someday occur, it was much more difficult to agree to a specific handoff date that would be announced to the congregation. After all, he was relatively young in his early 60s and he had a lot left to give.

On the other hand, the Incoming Pastor felt that it was his time. He had served for 15 years as an Associate Pastor and felt more than ready to take on the Lead Pastor Role. The Incoming Pastor felt it was important to agree on and communicate a formal transition date. It is no surprise that the two-year transition plan felt too short to the Outgoing Pastor and too long to the Incoming Pastor! Even with a formal transition plan, it would not be easy for the Outgoing Pastor to let go. Nor would it be easy for the Incoming Pastor to be patient.

How was their commitment to model humility demonstrated? Both pastors referred to experiences from the life of King David. The Outgoing Pastor said about the Incoming Pastor, "He never had an 'Absalom spirit' and he never undermined me, even when we had disagreements." The Incoming Pastor said about the Outgoing Pastor, "He never had a 'Saul spirit' and never threw spears at me—literally or figuratively." The hard work that they put into their relationship was evident to the church. In a world where leaders are seldom accused of being humble, the Outgoing and Incoming Pastors of Community Church were living examples of humility to the people of their church.

It is important to note that both pastors are convinced that showing humility and honor *after* the transition was equally important to showing humility and honor *before* the transition. The Incoming Pastor was and is careful to not to adopt the commonly held “out with the old and in with the new” attitude. While he has a fresh vision for Community Church, he doesn’t speak in terms of a vision to replace the vision of his predecessor but instead speaks in terms of building upon the foundation that has been laid. The Outgoing Pastor, who is still actively involved as a member of Community Church, does not enter into conversations with church members about favorably comparing his style of leadership to the leadership style of his successor. The united front that they worked so hard to build before the transition is still intact after the transition. Modeling humility is seen by both of them as critical to the ongoing health of Community Church.