

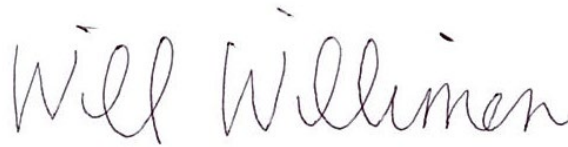
**Moses Is Dead: Strategies for Pastoral Transition**

by

M. Travis Simone

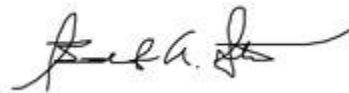
Date: April 10, 2024

Approved:



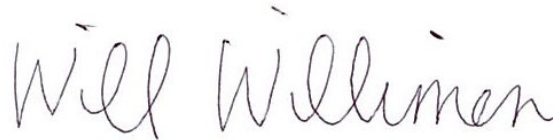
---

Bishop William H. Willimon, 1<sup>st</sup> Reader



---

Rev. Dr. Brent A. Strawn, 2<sup>nd</sup> Reader



---

Bishop William H. Willimon, D.Min. Director

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
in the Divinity School of Duke University

2024

ABSTRACT

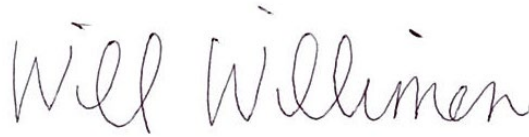
**Moses Is Dead: Strategies for Pastoral Transition**

by

M. Travis Simone

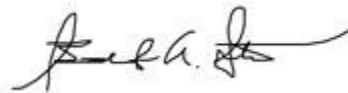
Date: April 10, 2024

Approved:




---

Bishop William H. Willimon, 1<sup>st</sup> Reader



---

Rev. Dr. Brent A. Strawn, 2<sup>nd</sup> Reader



---

Bishop William H. Willimon, D.Min. Director

An abstract of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
in the Divinity School of Duke University

2024

Copyright by  
Michael Travis Simone  
2024

## ABSTRACT

In the independent church, where there is no bishop to call and no presbytery to consult, which strategies ensure a successful transition from one pastor to another? Using the biblical narrative of the leadership transition from Moses to Joshua as a guiding metaphor, this thesis examines why leadership transitions are fraught for all churches and uniquely complicated for independent churches. It then proposes viable strategies to use when transitioning from one pastor to another.

The problem of pastoral transition is addressed by studying the successful leadership transitions that occurred within the Hampton Roads Consortium of Churches between 2013 and 2023. The thesis presents their stories, gives voice to the often-neglected perspective of successor pastors, and reflects on the findings through the lens of the classical theological disciplines: historical theology, systematic theology, biblical studies, and practical theology. It also engages the broader literature on leadership transitions within secular organizations as a way to evaluate pastoral leadership transitions in a wider context.

Out of the qualitative analysis conducted on interviews with the successor pastors of the Hampton Roads Consortium, five strategies emerged: look for one-eyed pastors; deploy a prophet, priest, and king; speak with candor; drop the baton; and seek interdependence. These strategies represent a framework from which independent churches may begin to develop much needed processes for when their inevitable moment of pastoral transition arrives. The strategies may also serve denominational churches desiring to inject creativity into the stale parts of their approach. Together, the strategies

outlined in this thesis are intended to help churches move from the loss of a leader to renewed mission as a community.

*To Nina*

It was your wisdom that told me to pick something up or put something down;  
it was your grace that helped me do both.

“They shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks.”

Isaiah 2:4b

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	xi
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
The Problem	1
Why Does the Problem Persist?	7
Introducing the Hampton Roads Consortium	11
Getting to Know the Consortium Churches	13
Methodology to be Employed	20
When the Story of Moses and Joshua Became My Story	22
Viable Strategies	23
<b>Chapter 2: Look for One-Eyed Pastors</b>	<b>25</b>
What is Winning?	25
A Lesson from Church History	30
Context of the Primary Sources	32
Examining the Primary Sources: Gregory of Nazianzus, <i>Oration 2</i>	35
Examining the Primary Sources: Ambrose of Milan, <i>De Officiis</i>	45
The Outlier in the Consortium	52
When Moses Found a One-Eyed Pastor	53
Jesus With a Suit On	56
<b>Chapter 3: Deploy a Prophet, Priest, and King</b>	<b>58</b>
Deploying the King	64
Deploying the Prophet	70



Deploying the Priest	76
Step-by-Step Instructions vs. Deployed Roles in the Consortium	78
Even Moses Could Not Fulfill All Three Roles	82
My Name is Brooks Wilson	83
Bryant Wright's Biggest Error	85
<b>Chapter 4: Speak with Candor</b>	<b>87</b>
An Unlikely Meeting	87
Messy and Unexpected Transitions	89
When a Church Fails to Speak with Candor	90
The Bible's Guide to Candor	93
The Purpose of Lamentations	95
How to Ask <i>Eka</i> ? Acrostic Poetry	98
Completely, Collectively, and Carefully	100
Additional Features of Lamentations	104
Candor and the Consortium	107
Moses Gets Candid	111
Thirty Years Later	114
The Resource Hidden in Plain Sight	116
<b>Chapter 5: Drop the Baton and Seek Interdependence</b>	<b>118</b>
Studying Success	118
Dropping the Baton in the Consortium	122
Seeking Interdependence in the Consortium	129

When God Instructed Moses to Drop the Baton	135
When God Instructed Joshua to Drop the Baton	137
A Missed Opportunity for Interdependence	138
<b>Chapter 6: Conclusion</b>	<b>141</b>
A Towering Figure	141
Crossing the Jordan	142
Viable Strategies	143
Who Should We Search For?	143
How Should We Conduct the Search?	144
What Do We Say If It All Goes Wrong?	145
What Helps Transitions Go Right?	146
Where to Find Additional Resources	147
A Final Interview	150
The Two Ideals to Practice	154
How Moses Died	158
Appendix A: Hampton Roads Consortium Covenant, 15 May 2004	160
Appendix B: Hampton Roads Consortium Covenant, 13 November 2016	164
Appendix C: Interview Questions	169
Appendix D: Large Church Size Dynamics	170
Appendix E: Williamsburg Community Chapel Sabbatical Policy	174
Bibliography	177
Biography	183

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Everything I do tends to turn into a community effort, and this thesis was no exception. For all who were a part of my community during this season, thank you.

As I complete this project, I am mindful of all my teachers. To Mr. David O'Donnell, your passion for well chosen words and well told stories captured my imagination. To Professor Michael Daise, I will always be grateful that you introduced me to biblical commentary. To Professor Marc Raphael, thank you for putting your name on the line for me one more time. To Bishop Will Willimon, thank you for your unmatched commitment to equipping pastors.

I am grateful for the care I received from the Strawn Family. To Rev. Dr. Brent Strawn, without you I would not be here. You were a pastor for a pastor, helping me sort out God's call to "go somewhere and learn something." You gave me the place to go ... not just Duke, but your home—and office! Our conversations were the bonus curriculum I needed. Thank you for your investment in my life and my ministry. Holly, you opened your home, kitchen, and washing machine to me. You never failed to ask about my day. Thank you for your hospitality. Micah, keep shooting corner 3s and killer pictures.

The Williamsburg diaspora in Durham reminded me of home while I was away. Christie, Jake, and Liz, our trips to Two Roosters were a highlight of intensive weeks.

I am grateful to have spent the last seventeen years among the people of the Williamsburg Community Chapel. To my small group, your friendship is the gift every pastor needs. You're my community within our great community. To all who have answered my calls when I needed advice, thank you for your wisdom. To the Chapel

family, I follow Jesus more closely because I follow him alongside you. Thank you for embracing the greatest lesson we've learned together—Jesus is the True Pastor.

To the elders of the church, thank you for your oversight. I am especially grateful to Gary Bruce and Ray Schultz. You said yes when it would have been easier to say no.

To the staff and leadership team, you meet people wherever they are. You make community our middle name. You join in one common disciple-making effort. It brings me joy to serve with you. Rich, your partnership means a great deal to me. I see you. Luke, your constant hustle with double towels in your back pockets creates the space for me to focus on leadership and preaching because I know the operations are covered. Eileen, thank you for developing the continuing education policy. Its positive effects on our team will reverberate for years to come. James, thank you for saying yes.

I often require a lot of assistance. Throughout the program, I received help from two of the smartest and hardest working people I know. To Alexis Kincaid, thank you for being the rare Carolina graduate who is willing to help a Duke student. Only a true sister in Christ would serve so selflessly. We can cheer for the Tribe together. I don't have what it takes, but maybe *we* do. In my personal record book, you've already graduated from seminary. To Kate Armstrong, you showed me the path and walked it with me.

This project would be greatly diminished without the stories of the pastors from the Hampton Roads Consortium. Ben, Chris, Craig, Dan, Doug, Garrett, and Robb, thank you for generously sharing your experience and insight with me. May the sacrifices you made to transition your congregations well become normative in the Church.

Finally, I reserve my greatest gratitude for my family. To my mom and dad, during my most frustrating moments with formal education, you sought first to understand me, then you helped me understand myself. You believed I could do it and invested in my future accordingly. Thank you for your sacrifice so I could grow.

To my children, Sophia, Olivia, Leila, and Ruthie, thank you for your patience. I am sorry for the moments when I was “tense” or “on edge.” Your frequent reminders that “Moses is still dead!” made me smile. Your stories, theories, declarations, humor, and dances around the dinner table were the respite my brain needed. I am proud of the women you’re becoming. Let’s get breakfast on Saturday.

To my wife, Nina, without you, none of this happens. By “this,” I mean every good thing in my world. Twenty-one years ago, you said yes to a life with me. I was happy then; I am in awe now.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### *The Problem*

“Moses is dead.” This phrase, taken from the opening verses of the book of Joshua, frames a persistent leadership challenge. Namely, how can organizations endure, remain productive, and even flourish after the loss of their current leader? The book of Joshua’s full text reveals the depth of this challenge: “After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, ‘My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites.’”<sup>1</sup> Even “after the death of Moses,” God tells Joshua explicitly, “Moses is dead.”

Why does God show up to share this news? Had no one realized Moses was dead on their own? Was Moses’s death so difficult to discover that it required divine revelation? Deuteronomy offers readers four separate warnings of Moses’s impending death in chapter 31, verses 2, 14, 16, and 29. Additionally, in Deuteronomy 32, Moses sings a farewell song of judgment and hope. Deuteronomy 33 records Moses’s last blessing for the tribes of Israel. Finally, Deuteronomy 34 narrates his death extensively, details the beginning and end of a period of mourning, and affirms Joshua as Moses’s

---

<sup>1</sup> Joshua 1:1-2 (New Revised Standard Version). Scripture quotations, unless otherwise marked, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

publicly ordained successor. Given the clarity surrounding Moses's final days and God's direct affirmation of Joshua's leadership following Moses's death, it is all the more striking that God said directly to Joshua, "Moses is dead." God's actions highlight the difficulty inherent at this crossroads of Israel's life together.

Moses's death likely led to a variety of questions for the Israelites: Who are we without Moses? Is God still with us? Do we have what it takes to survive as a community? And, should we continue the mission to enter the Promised Land? Perhaps God delivered the news of Moses's death personally because God knows that transitioning leadership from one person to another is where nations, communities, organizations, and especially churches stumble.

The flagship evangelical magazine in North America, *Christianity Today*, reported on one such stumble in 2022: "Willow Creek Community Church, one of the largest and most highly regarded congregations in the nation, will lay off 30 percent of its staff due to post-COVID-19 declines in attendance and giving."<sup>2</sup> The church led with a pandemic-related explanation to reporters, but reading further reveals deeper issues surrounding their leadership transition. The article goes on to state, "The church has struggled in recent years after the resignation of co-founder Bill Hybels, who was accused of sexual harassment and abuse of power. The co-pastors who succeeded Hybels

---

<sup>2</sup> Bob Smietana, "Willow Creek Cuts Staff Budget by \$6.5 Million," *Christianity Today*, May 20, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/may/willow-creek-megachurch-staff-layoffs-covid-pandemic-attend.html>.

also resigned not long afterward, followed by the entire church elder board.”<sup>3</sup> How did one of “the largest and most highly regarded congregations in the nation” end up in such a difficult place? A variety of factors, including overdependence on a single leader who engaged in patterns of abusive and sinful behavior, forced the church to make a transition they were not ready for despite five years of planning.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, they were not able to recover.

It is important to note that churches stumble in transition apart from scandal. Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN, for example, planned their transition from well-known, sometimes-polarizing pastor John Piper for a decade. Despite their meticulous planning, Piper’s successor, Jason Meyer, resigned a year after being installed as the new senior pastor. *The Christian Post* captured the dismay of the congregation when it interviewed one of the campus pastors: “This is another painful and confusing moment for us. It’s confusing and painful corporately because Jason took the mantle from Pastor John Piper ... It feels jarring.”<sup>5</sup> When Joshua heard the words “Moses is dead,” he was likely jarred too.

Existing literature on the topic of succession highlights lack of planning as a key issue facing churches, but the reasons behind this failure to plan remain hotly contested.

---

<sup>3</sup> Smietana, “Willow Creek.”

<sup>4</sup> Bill Hybels, “Opening Talk,” presented at The Global Leadership Summit of The Willow Creek Association, South Barrington, IL, August 9, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Gryboski, “Painful and Confusing’: John Piper’s Successor Resigns from Lead Pastor Role at Bethlehem Baptist Church,” *The Christian Post*, July 20, 2021, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/john-pipers-successor-resigns-as-lead-pastor-at-bethlehem-baptist-church.html>.



In their book, *Next: Pastoral Succession that Works*, church organizational consultants William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird attempt to heighten the contemporary church's awareness regarding the need for better leadership transition planning. They begin with the simultaneously bold and obvious assertion, "Every pastor is an interim pastor."<sup>6</sup> Vanderbloemen and Bird unpack this theme as they seek to rouse leaders and boards from their plan-avoiding stupor. They write, "Few ministers consider that truth. Few are eager to admit that their time with their present church will one day end. But ultimately, all pastors are 'interim' because the day when a successor takes over will come for everyone in ministry."<sup>7</sup> If every pastor is an interim pastor, church boards and pastors must work together diligently to plan for the inevitable moment of transition.

Instead, Vanderbloemen and Bird's experience reveals, churches avoid the issue of succession more often than they plan for it. Vanderbloemen and Bird write, "There's an old saying: everyone wants to talk about succession ... until it's their own."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, "For way too long, the subject of succession has been avoided in the church, in pastors' gatherings, and even in the pastor's home. Those in leadership may not talk about it, but succession happens anyway."<sup>9</sup> Ignoring the succession conversation may delay planning, but it cannot change the outcome. Moses always dies.

---

<sup>6</sup> William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird, *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2020), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Congregational consultants Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree also discuss churches' avoidance of important conversations regarding leadership transitions. In their book, *The Elephant in the Boardroom: Speaking the Unspoken about Pastoral Transitions*, they contend, "Leaders who design worship services with an impulse of excellence driving every detail are willing to leave the impact of a major leadership transition to a curious silence. When it comes to dealing with a pastoral transition, many strong leaders stop leading."<sup>10</sup> Even thoughtful, dedicated leaders resort to leaving transition up to chance. They stop leading at the exact moment leadership is essential. This is particularly unfortunate given Weese and Crabtree's claim that planning for succession is the second most important need in every church. In their estimation, only "well-trained and committed pastoral and lay leadership that is culturally relevant is more critical."<sup>11</sup> Churches cannot thrive when they leave crucial needs unaddressed, yet transition planning languishes untouched by many church leaders.

Vanderbloemen and Bird's and Weese and Crabtree's observation is confirmed by a 2009 study of Church of Christ pastors. The study, quoted in *Christianity Today*, reports, "Most pastors aren't dreaming of retirement. Only 1 of 4 had plans for full retirement; more than that said they didn't plan to retire at all."<sup>12</sup> These statistics persist

---

<sup>10</sup> Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree, *The Elephant in the Boardroom: Speaking the Unspoken about Pastoral Transitions* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2020), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Weese and Crabtree, *Elephant*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Ruth Moon, "Quitting Time: The Pope Retired. Should Your Pastor?" *Christianity Today*, March 12, 2013, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/april/quitting-time.html>.

despite the fact that no matter how impressive a pastor's leadership skills, length of tenure, or vision for the future, someday the phrase "Moses is dead" will pertain to every church leader.

Unlike many modern pastors, Moses accepted the reality that he would not lead forever. In Deuteronomy 31:1-2, Moses makes it clear to all Israel what God has already made clear to him: he will not lead Israel into the next phase of their community life in the Promised Land.

When Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, he said to them: "I am now one hundred twenty years old. I am no longer able to get about, and the LORD has told me, 'You shall not cross over this Jordan.'"<sup>13</sup>

The Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates the phrase "get about" as, "I am no longer able to go out and come in."<sup>14</sup> The Common English Bible, meanwhile, more colloquially captures the Hebrew idiom as, "I can't move around well anymore."<sup>15</sup> While the New International Version takes some liberties with the Hebrew text, it also captures the deeper implication of Moses's words better than the other translations, and it reveals the theme of the whole chapter: "I am no longer able to lead you."<sup>16</sup>

Biblical commentator Ronald E. Clements confirms the warrant for the NIV's dynamic equivalence approach to translating Deuteronomy 31:2, writing, "From a historical and theological perspective the material contained in Deuteronomy 29–34

---

<sup>13</sup> Deuteronomy 31:1-2 (NRSV).

<sup>14</sup> Deuteronomy 31:2b (Revised Standard Version).

<sup>15</sup> Deuteronomy 31:2b (Common English Bible).

<sup>16</sup> Deuteronomy 31:2b (New International Version).

reflects a number of major issues regarding the nature of religious leadership.”<sup>17</sup> In light of Clements’s view that this section of Deuteronomy deals with fundamental aspects of religious leadership, Deuteronomy 31:2 highlights the often-ignored reality that pastors cannot serve forever.

Deuteronomy 31:2, therefore, speaks directly to a key mile marker that will be reached, without exception, for every pastor in every church. It describes the moment in a pastor’s ministry when he or she must admit to themselves, and potentially to the wide variety of their constituencies, the blunt truth that, “I am no longer able to lead you.” If either Moses or Israel dreamed that Moses would lead God’s people in perpetuity, Deuteronomy 31:2 forced them back to reality.

### ***Why Does the Problem Persist?***

Since it is obvious that no leader lasts forever, why is planning for succession so difficult? Vanderbloemen and Bird and Weese and Crabtree all agree that pastoral succession is vitally important for the health of the church. They also agree that people regularly fail to have the necessary conversations about inevitable leadership transitions. The answer to why pastors and churches fail to plan for this event, however, is where their views diverge.

---

<sup>17</sup> Ronald E. Clements, “Deuteronomy,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Vol. 1*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 518.

Vanderbloemen and Bird assert that people avoid conversations about transition because there is no clear model that fits the variety of church contexts in which these conversations are necessary. They write, “While succession is uniformly important and urgent, there is no uniform approach that works for all churches.”<sup>18</sup> Using what they call “pace setting churches” as evidence, they detail eight situations that require different approaches to leadership transitions.<sup>19</sup>

In one example, the senior pastor promises an associate pastor a short runway to become his successor. The succession candidate is left wondering what to do over the next year to ensure a fruitful transition. In another situation, a pastor has served well for twenty-seven years, but the church is now in decline. No one knows how to speak to the pastor about what to do next.<sup>20</sup> In addition to Vanderbloemen and Bird’s eight examples, it does not require much imagination to think through a wider variety of transition scenarios. Perhaps a pastor’s aging parents have a medical emergency which necessitates an immediate move to a church closer to home. Perhaps a church is blindsided when a recruiter contacts a pastor with an offer too good to turn down. The variety of scenarios are endless. Vanderbloemen and Bird assert that because every context presents a unique and often unpredictable situation, planning feels futile and churches avoid it.

---

<sup>18</sup> Vanderbloemen and Bird, *Next*, 31.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Vanderbloemen and Bird seem a bit too impressed with their own consulting firm in this book, often highlighting their work with “pace setting” churches as badges of honor. Unfortunately, they seem proudest of their work on transitions at now largely discredited churches like Mars Hill and Willow Creek. The second edition, from which these quotes were taken, removed some of their work with problematic churches, yet they did not address the excessive self-confidence of the first edition.

<sup>20</sup> Vanderbloemen and Bird, *Next*, 31-33.

Weese and Crabtree do not discuss as many particular transition scenarios as Vanderbloemen and Bird. Rather, they see common spiritual and emotional hurdles at play in every pastoral transition. They cite Linda Karlovec, a psychologist who specializes in organizational therapy and argues, “almost all resistance to organizational change is emotional, *though it is perceived to be rational*.”<sup>21</sup> Based on her counseling practice and their experience, Weese and Crabtree claim, “Instead of being grounded in spiritual principle, the reasons for silence seem to be rooted more in fear and low self-confidence.”<sup>22</sup> In contrast to Vanderbloemen and Bird, who fail to find an essential unity in the variety of situations that require pastoral transition, Weese and Crabtree list five universal emotional blockages to the succession conversation:

- If we talk about pastoral transition we might put the idea in someone’s head and make it more likely to happen.
- We will create a lame duck situation in which effective ministry becomes impossible.
- A discussion about pastoral transition will have unintended consequences that we do not know how to manage.
- We don’t have the resources to deal with transition planning and be successful.
- Our peers and colleagues won’t support us in doing it a different way, and we are not sure we want to be pioneers on the road of better pastoral transition if this means going it alone.<sup>23</sup>

Yet even considering the difficult emotions that often impede preparation for a leadership transition, they conclude, “All these issues can be addressed given the right resources and

---

<sup>21</sup> Conversation with Linda Karlovec, cited in Weese and Crabtree, *Elephant*, 13-14

<sup>22</sup> Weese and Crabtree, *Elephant*, 13-14.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

spiritual resolve.”<sup>24</sup> It is encouraging to hear consultants like Weese and Crabtree say the daunting task of succession planning is not insurmountable, but they fail to share any real-world stories where pastors and boards actually overcome these obstacles.

While consultants can coach, stories have the capacity to strengthen the resolve of pastors and church boards for the long journey ahead.<sup>25</sup> Brian McCormack, a pastor who conducted research on predominantly white congregations that intentionally sought to become multiethnic churches, is convinced that stories play a key role in congregational transformation. He writes, “Although statistics prove change is needed, stories prove change is possible.”<sup>26</sup> Without stories of healthy transitions, the headlines of botched leadership transitions may overwhelm pastors, boards, and congregations. Without stories, the crucial conversations around succession planning tend to remain abstract. Without stories, it becomes difficult to comprehend what God is doing in the midst of leadership transitions in our churches. Stories help us imagine a future beyond our present circumstances, and they help us make sense of that which we find difficult to explain. Again, McCormack’s insight is instructive: “Stories prove change is possible.”<sup>27</sup>

This thesis will provide real-world stories that spotlight the resources and spiritual resolve required to plan for and execute a successful succession process. The stories will

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to Brian McCormack for his insight into the role stories play in leading change in churches. Bryan Robert McCormack, “The Possible Church: Stories of Those Who have Led White Congregations into a Multiethnic Reality,” (D.Min Thesis, Duke Divinity School, 2022), 4.

<sup>26</sup> McCormack, “The Possible Church,” 31.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

come from the seven churches that make up the Hampton Roads Consortium of Churches. The church I pastor is a member of this group.

### ***Introducing the Hampton Roads Consortium***

The Hampton Roads Consortium of Churches consists of seven independent, non-denominationally affiliated churches in the Hampton Roads, or Tidewater, region of southeastern Virginia. Although the Consortium has only formally existed since 2004, oral history and covenant documents suggest that the partnership of these churches can be traced back more than eighty-five years to a series of tent revival meetings hosted by the Christian Missionary Alliance denomination in Norfolk, VA in the 1930s.<sup>28</sup> Out of those meetings, leaders sensed the need for a new local church. They believed God was at work in new ways that could languish if the movement was subjected to their traditional denominational structures. They made the generous, strategic, and future-focused decision to plant an independent church, the Tabernacle Church of Norfolk, rather than one affiliated with the Christian Missionary Alliance.

From this one humble decision, the churches that emerged—the churches that now make up the Hampton Roads Consortium—sought to faithfully apply Jesus’s words, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”<sup>29</sup> A desire for faithful application of this verse led to vital local congregations,

---

<sup>28</sup> See Appendix A: Hampton Roads Consortium Covenant, 15 May 2004, and Appendix B: Hampton Roads Consortium Covenant, 13 November 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Acts 1:8b (NRSV).



ministry development beyond the walls of each church, and an enduring commitment to global missions.<sup>30</sup> The ministries founded or inspired by the Consortium address cross-cultural, medical, educational, spiritual, economic, and special needs issues in their communities and beyond.

In light of the Consortium churches' shared history and connections to one another through the church-planting efforts of the Tabernacle Church of Norfolk, the leaders of the Consortium churches adopted an official covenant in 2004 that identified common values intended to shape each church's ministry and keep the churches aligned.<sup>31</sup>

John Dunlap, Gene Garrick, and Dick Woodward were the Hampton Roads Consortium's first-generation leaders. They established the vision, lived out the values, and initiated many of the church plants and ministries still bearing fruit today.<sup>32</sup> Their commitment to developing new leaders within the churches produced a second generation of pastors and leaders who sustained and grew the movement.

The Consortium was successful in transitioning from the first generation of leaders to the second. The flagship church of the Consortium, The Tabernacle Church of Norfolk, and its first church plant, the Virginia Beach Community Chapel, have even transitioned to their third generation of leaders and beyond. When the Covenant was first

---

<sup>30</sup> Consortium Covenant, 2004 and 20016.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

adopted in 2004, however, leaders could only make an aspirational statement regarding additional leadership transitions. They wrote,

As we prepare for the next and future generations, we desire to preserve the distinctive qualities, relationships, and heritage of our churches and the Consortium. Furthermore, we believe nurturing our common vision and continued cooperation will honor and serve the Lord as He works through us to build His Kingdom.<sup>33</sup>

In 2013, nine years after this statement was adopted, a steady stream of leadership transitions began. Over the past ten years, every church in the Consortium has transitioned from the second generation of leadership to the third generation or beyond. The stories of these transitions were all classified as “successful” by the successor pastors. In McCormack’s framework, they will help us see that transitioning from one pastoral leader to another is indeed possible. In addition, when these stories are viewed through the lens of the classical theological disciplines, we will learn principles to shape the strategies for healthy transitions in a variety of contexts.

### ***Getting to Know the Consortium Churches<sup>34</sup>***

#### **Centerpoint Community Church (CCC)**

- Location: Chesapeake, VA.
- Year founded: 1979.

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Doug Bunn, Robb Esperat, Dan Hardesty, Ben LoPresti, Craig Rush, Travis Simone, Garrett Spitz, Chris Williams, “Some Additional Information on Your Churches,” June 5, 2023, self-reported by current pastoral leadership via email.

- Average Sunday Attendance: 315.
- Average Budget: \$1,000,000.
- Successor Pastors: Dan Hardesty and Chris Williams (3<sup>rd</sup> full-time senior pastors).
- Succeeded Pastor: Scott Hill.
- History and Mission: Centerpoint Community Church was planted in 1979 (as Community Church of Chesapeake) by the Tabernacle Church of Norfolk as part of a vision to plant evangelical, missional churches in Hampton Roads. CCC seeks to remain true to its original DNA with a commitment to expository preaching, discipleship, community outreach, and domestic and cross-cultural missions work. Their vision is to know Christ and make him known. They seek to make God known and loved both at home and throughout the world. This vision is put into practice in three areas of congregational life that church leadership emphasizes: communion with God, community with one another, and commission to the world near and far.

#### Eastside Church (Eastside)

- Location: Williamsburg, VA.
- Year Founded: 2018.
- Average Sunday Attendance: 110.
- Average Budget: \$330,000.
- Founding Pastor: Doug Bunn.
- History and Mission: Eastside started as a church plant from the Williamsburg Community Chapel. The aim was to reach a different geographic, economic,

linguistic, and ethnic section of the city that was under-served by the mother church. In addition, the planting church desired to reignite the pioneering spirit which was characteristic of its ministry before its latest building project. Eastside is a joyful, welcoming, and prayer-filled neighborhood church. The church desires to help people grow in their relationship with the Lord and to serve the local community. The mission of the church is to make disciples who make disciples in union with Christ and with each other.

James River Community Church (JRCC)

- Location: Suffolk, VA.
- Year Founded: 1986 (in its current iteration).
- Average Sunday Attendance: 75.
- Average Budget: \$150,000.
- Successor Pastor: Ben LoPresti (4<sup>th</sup> full-time senior pastor).
- Succeeded Pastor: Claude Marshall.
- Transition Year: 2016.
- History and Mission: In 1890, Mount Zion Christian Church was planted in the Eclipse neighborhood in northern Suffolk, VA. In 1986, Grace Fellowship was planted just down the road. In 1995, Mount Zion Christian Church and Grace Fellowship joined together and formed a new church called Mount Zion Fellowship. In 2008, Mount Zion Fellowship changed its name to James River Community Church. James River Community Church exists to know Christ and

to make him known. The church is committed to the authority of scripture, biblical theology, expository preaching, and meaningful membership.

#### Peninsula Community Chapel (PCC)

- Location: Yorktown, VA.
- Year Founded: 1983.
- Average Sunday Attendance: 600.
- Average Budget: \$1,200,000.
- Successor Pastor: Garret Spitz (2<sup>nd</sup> full-time senior pastor).
- Succeeded Pastor: Tom Kenney.
- Transition Year: 2020.
- History and Mission: Peninsula Community Chapel was planted by Tabernacle Church of Norfolk when a group of men and women who had been commuting to Norfolk from the Peninsula were asked to be part of a new church plant.<sup>35</sup> They began holding worship services in a home under the pastoral leadership of Tom Kenney in 1983. After meeting in various rented spaces, the church purchased land and moved into a permanent facility in 2000. Over the years, the Lord led the ministry to adopt three different unreached people groups and to send out over

---

<sup>35</sup> The Hampton Roads region of Virginia is further subdivided into areas colloquially referred to as “the Southside” and “the Peninsula.” The mouth of the Chesapeake Bay creates an important geographic and psychological boundary that bisects the region. In addition, “the Peninsula” refers to the southernmost of Virginia’s three mainland peninsulas. Travel between the Southside and the Peninsula is often impeded by traffic on the bridge-tunnel complex that connects the region. Attending church on the Southside while living on the Peninsula would make full participation in congregational life difficult.

fifty global ministry partners to various corners of the globe. The church's mission is to make disciples who know God's joy and change his world.

### Tabernacle Church (Tab)

- Location: Norfolk, VA.
- Year Founded: 1935.
- Average Sunday Attendance: 450.
- Average Budget: \$650,000.
- Successor Pastor: Craig Rush (6<sup>th</sup> full-time senior pastor).
- Succeeded Pastor: Kenny Bryant (Ed Haywood served as the interim pastor).
- Transition Year: 2020.
- History and Mission: In 1935, Tabernacle Church of Norfolk was founded as a non-denominational church by the Christian Missionary Alliance denomination. Global missions have been the heartbeat of the church since its inception. In addition to its emphasis on international missions, the church remains actively engaged in the local Tidewater community. Tabernacle Church is the fountainhead of the Hampton Roads Consortium. The church planted the Virginia Beach Community Chapel, The Peninsula Community Chapel, and Centerpoint Community Church, and it assisted in the founding of the Williamsburg Community Chapel. Tabernacle is currently focused on becoming a multigenerational and multiethnic congregation while continuing to catalyze a diverse missions movement centered on Christ. The church summarizes their work with the motto, "From Norfolk to the Nations."

## Virginia Beach Community Chapel (VBCC)

- Location: Virginia Beach, VA.
- Year Founded: 1954.
- Average Sunday Attendance: 400.
- Average Budget: \$1,500,000.
- Successor Pastor: Robb Esperat (8<sup>th</sup> full-time senior pastor).
- Succeeded Pastor: Rich Hardison.
- Transition Year: 2017.
- History and Mission: In the early 1950s, the pastors of Tabernacle Church of Norfolk had a vision to plant non-denominational, missions-minded Bible churches in every city in Hampton Roads. Virginia Beach Community Chapel was the first church plant born from that vision. It began as a small group meeting in the Newcastle Hotel at the oceanfront, led by pastors from Tabernacle Church. In 1954, the church officially began, and the land on which it still sits was purchased. Dick Woodward was installed as the senior pastor in 1957. Pastor Woodward would develop an enormous teaching ministry, including regular television and radio programs. He authored *The Mini Bible College*, which has been distributed in over sixty countries and translated into twenty-six languages worldwide.<sup>36</sup> In the wake of this legacy, the church continues to be committed to

---

<sup>36</sup> Dick Woodward, *The Mini Bible College: Old Testament Handbook* (Hampton, VA: International Cooperating Ministries, 1995).

seeing the gospel move in their hearts, communities, and throughout the world.

Their mission is to know Jesus and to make Jesus known.

#### Williamsburg Community Chapel (WCC)

- Location: Williamsburg, VA.
- Year founded 1976.
- Average Sunday Attendance: 1800.
- Average Budget: \$3,400,000.
- Successor Pastor: M. Travis Simone (3<sup>rd</sup> full time senior pastor).
- Succeeded Pastor: Bill Warrick.<sup>37</sup>
- Transition Year: 2014.
- History and Mission: In September of 1976, two William and Mary science faculty families sought to establish a fellowship committed to Christ and the essential teachings of the historic Christian faith. Their goal was to found a church that celebrated the variety of denominational perspectives while remaining unwavering in its commitment to biblical authority. They began meeting in their homes but moved to a local Catholic school as the body grew. In 1989, the church moved into its first permanent facility. Over the years, the building has grown and changed (the church has completed three different building projects on the same

---

<sup>37</sup> The Williamsburg Community Chapel is the church where I currently serve. The reader will learn a great deal about the congregation of WCC through this thesis. Bill Warrick served on staff from 1984 to 2013. He, along with his family, were the vessels through which much of the church's ministry and buildings came to exist for the Chapel family today. We are grateful for his work to help the congregation fulfill the mission of the church.



piece of church property with a fourth currently being planned). However, the mission of the church remains the same: the Williamsburg Community Chapel exists to make disciples as an interdenominational family of faith wherein all those who love Jesus Christ and desire to serve him may join in one common effort.

### ***Methodology to be Employed***

In order to offer effective strategies for pastoral leadership transitions in the independent church context, this thesis uses the leadership transition from Moses to Joshua as a guiding biblical narrative and places that transition in conversation with business, religious, and denominational literature on succession planning.

In addition, the thesis draws conclusions from interviews conducted with current pastors of churches that have gone through transitions in the past ten years. In particular, it draws from interviews conducted with the successor pastors of the seven Hampton Roads Consortium churches. These interviews were intended to help spot trends, develop principles, provide illustrations, and form recommendations for congregations facing pastoral transitions.

The stories of these transitions illustrate that change is possible. To move from abstract possibility to applicable principles, however, the stories must be interpreted. This thesis interprets the stories of pastoral transitions in the Hampton Roads Consortium through the lens of the four classical theological disciplines: historical theology,

systematic theology, biblical studies, and practical theology. Each discipline frames a strategic question that aided in developing at least one strategy for pastoral transition.

Finally, research for this thesis was conducted with primary attention placed on the successor rather than the succeeded. Much of the existing literature on leadership transitions was written either by consultants, who spent most of their time talking to outgoing pastors about what kind of person they hoped would take their place and carry on their legacy, or by the succeeded leader, who hoped to teach others about the plan they used to find a worthy successor.<sup>38</sup> As Lee Kricher writes in his book, *Seamless Pastoral Transition*, “I came to believe that it is not enough for me to unearth my talents, I also must help those in my sphere of influence to unearth their talents. As leadership guru Peter Drucker puts it, ‘The fruit of your labor grows on other people’s trees.’”<sup>39</sup> Here, Kricher issues a worthy challenge to every leader who will one day be succeeded: take your role in the succession process seriously. What Kricher and many others fail to discuss, however, is how the successors view the role of the succeeded. What kinds of behaviors and attitudes helped or hindered the successors as they were called to lead? This thesis seeks to add this often-neglected voice to the conversation on succession planning.

---

<sup>38</sup> Some of the books in my bibliography that fall into these categories are: *Next, Elephant in the Boardroom*, *Finding a Pastor*, *Succession*, and Lee Kricher, *Seamless Pastoral Transition: 3 Imperatives—6 Pitfalls* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2022).

<sup>39</sup> Kricher, *Seamless Pastoral Transition*, 31.

### *When the Story of Moses and Joshua Became My Story*

Biblical scholar Patrick Miller, commenting on Deuteronomy 31, which deals with the transition from Moses to Joshua, describes the pain that often accompanies the succession process:

This whole section deals with the situation that confronts the people of God frequently in the pages of Scripture and beyond: What happens when the leader of the people moves off the scene? The community has been guided by an individual who led them when they did not know where to go, provided for them in times of trouble and need, and instructed them about how to live. The disappearance of such a leader is a traumatic event.<sup>40</sup>

When a church loses its pastor, congregants may experience grief, pain, confusion, or denial. They may also feel both excitement and fear regarding what comes next. Because each person feels a unique mixture of these emotions, one individual cannot be led through the experience in the same way as another. Collectively, the congregation may experience such a variety of emotions that it needs to be jolted from its bewilderment with some version of God's simple, strong words to Joshua—"Moses is dead."

Miller observes that pain induced by the departure of a leader is not limited to the Bible. Rather, distress caused by a leadership transition confronts communities regularly. It seems that Moses has died many times, and the story of Moses and Joshua is the story of every institution of mature age.

For me, Moses died in a boardroom. For several years, I served Williamsburg Community Chapel as an associate pastor, reporting to a beloved senior pastor with

---

<sup>40</sup> Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 218.

twenty-nine years of service to our church. Under his leadership, the church grew from around 500 to a consistent attendance of more than 1,800 regular worshipers. The church briefly grew even larger after the pastor completed a successful multiyear campaign to open an expanded worship space in 2008. Though the ministry qualified as a megachurch, its growth came largely through the relational and preaching gifts of the pastor instead of through a systematic approach intended to manage or encourage growth.<sup>41</sup> As the size increased, staff, board members, and some congregants became concerned about the mismatch between the pastor's leadership style and the size of the church. Every decision ran through him. Every mistake faced his critique. The church's mission suffered, struggling to squeeze through the decision-making bottlenecks he created.

In the first board meeting following his departure, the board struggled to find their footing. Eventually a board member voiced what everyone was feeling, asking "What does this board even do?" An honest reply came from another board member: "I don't know, we always just did what the pastor told us to do." I sighed and thought, "Well, that's no longer a viable strategy." Moses was dead.

### ***Viable Strategies***

---

<sup>41</sup> Lyle Schaller, an influential congregational researcher, calls any church with more than 1,800 in regular worship attendance a mega church. See Lyle E. Schaller, *The Very Large Church: New Rules for Leaders* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 28-31.

The question this thesis seeks to answer stems from that revealing moment in the boardroom: when Moses is dead, what are viable strategies for pastoral succession? This question is exceedingly important because, as already noted, every church will eventually face the need to transition leadership from one pastor to another. Whether Moses recently died at your church, you foresee an upcoming transition, or you simply desire to get a healthy conversation started around the topic of succession planning, the following five strategies will help your church chart a course from “Moses is dead” to readiness to “cross the Jordan:” look for one-eyed pastors; deploy a prophet, priest, and king; speak with candor; drop the baton; and, seek interdependence.

Some churches have bishops, district superintendents, or presbyteries to assist in the process of pastoral transition. For independent churches, who have no bishop to call or presbytery to consult, these strategies offer a framework for developing a succession plan. They will also prove helpful in more formal structures alongside established processes.

## Chapter 2

### Look for One-Eyed Pastors

#### *What is Winning?*

To implement viable strategies for pastoral transition in the independent church context it is essential to understand what strategy is. Without a clear and agreed-upon definition of strategy, congregants, board members, and the search committee will develop competing priorities that diminish the possibility of a successful transition. Former Proctor and Gamble CEO A.G. Lafley and management professor Roger L. Martin break through the debate around the definition of strategy with the terse, exceedingly practical, and universally applicable claim, “Strategy is choice.”<sup>1</sup> To be more precise, they argue that strategy is a set of interrelated choices organizations must make to succeed in their chosen endeavor. They write,

Strategy can seem mystical and mysterious. It isn't. It is easily defined. It is a set of choices about winning. Again, it is an integrated set of choices that uniquely positions the firm in its industry so as to create sustainable advantage and superior value relative to the competition.<sup>2</sup>

That is, “strategy” is an organization’s game plan for differentiating itself in crowded markets and then producing desired results. Lafley and Martin argue that the first step in devising a strategy is to answer the question, “*What is your winning aspiration?* [This is] the purpose of your enterprise, its motivating aspiration.”<sup>3</sup> At the core of effective

---

<sup>1</sup> A.G Lafley and Roger L. Martin, *Playing to Win: How Strategy Really Works* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

strategy for pastoral transition, then, is the answer to the question, what is winning? Some churches might imagine winning is hiring a younger pastor who can attract the next generation of families to the church. Other churches believe winning is recruiting a dynamic preacher. Still others imagine winning is finding a pastor with a proven track record of strong administrative skills. Before doing anything else, a church must decide how to answer that question.

For most churches, “winning” in the pastoral search process involves hiring a pastor with a skillset that matches the needs of their church. Typically, a search begins with an assessment of the needs or desires of the church. Then a committee seeks candidates who have the potential to do for the church what the church wants done.

This may sound simplistic, but it is exactly what pastoral transition consultant Joel Hathaway argues for. Hathaway critiques an older popular approach of having search committees start their work by writing a formal job description. Although he offers readers help in “rethinking the process,” even his updated process focuses on what the search committee wants the pastor to do.<sup>4</sup> He recommends the search committee conduct a leadership survey to identify areas of core conviction for the church. These areas include theological convictions, communication preferences, relational tendencies, and leadership style.<sup>5</sup> By identifying the church’s top priorities, Hathaway argues, the survey offers clarity regarding what the pastor does. He writes, “The outcome of the leadership survey is a set of practical behaviors and practices that are common between

---

<sup>4</sup>Joel Hathaway, *Finding a Pastor: A Handbook for Ministerial Search Committees* (Lawrenceville, GA: PCA Committee on Discipleship Ministries, 2018), 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-23.

the primary style of the church and the new senior/solo pastor.”<sup>6</sup> While clarity regarding what a pastor does is one path toward defining winning, this chapter challenges churches to choose a different starting point.

Rather than first asking, “What should our pastor *do*?” what if we asked, “Who should our pastor *be*?” That is, what type of life should the pastor be rigorously engaged in pursuing? What is his character? What virtues should he possess, and how should he be engaged in cultivating those virtues?<sup>7</sup>

These questions are especially important in the independent church context, where there are no official institutional structures to ensure standards of ministerial, biblical, spiritual, and emotional formation for the pastorate. I attended two United Methodist seminaries. While there are certainly aspects of denominational theological education that need to be reformed, every student at a Methodist seminary has access to courses on Wesleyan theology, history, and polity. The research-university-based school where I undertook my ministerial preparation still required that all United Methodist candidates for ordination take an evangelism course. The denominational structures aided in the spiritual formation of the pastors in training. They guaranteed the administration of a uniform basic level of preparation for the core tasks of church ministry.

These character—and tradition—shaping forces are decentralized in the independent church context. Search committees in independent churches look for pastors

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>7</sup> Taking into account the variety of denominational perspectives regarding the roles of men and women in the church, respecting the different views within the Hampton Roads Consortium, and seeking to write with clarity, the author will shift between male and female pronouns when referring to contemporary pastors and other church leaders in this thesis.



without the help or established requirements of larger credentialing institutions. When responding to the question, “What do you believe was most important to your church in looking for a pastor?” the successor pastors of the Hampton Roads Consortium focused almost entirely on practical matters.<sup>8</sup> Their responses clustered around two themes: candidates’ preaching skills and their perspective on change.

When people imagine what a pastor does, they are likely to think of preaching. Preaching is the most public aspect of a pastor’s role, and effective preaching was what the churches represented by my interviewees wanted done most of all. Ben LoPresti of JRCC said, “85 to 90 percent of what the church wanted was preaching. They wanted a faithful and expositional preacher.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, VBCC’s Robb Esperat said, “The thing that I heard the most was the primacy of preaching.”<sup>10</sup> Centerpoint Community Church’s Dan Hardesty echoed, “Our congregation values critical thinking and good Bible exposition.”<sup>11</sup>

In addition to effective preaching, the seven churches considered in this thesis were quite concerned about the prospective pastor’s approach to managing change. The topic came up frequently. Dan Hardesty said, “Our church was looking for what it was already getting. They wanted continuity.”<sup>12</sup> Craig Rush, the sixth successor pastor of Tab, highlighted the often-paradoxical desires congregations have when it comes to change:

---

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix C for the questions used during the interview process.

<sup>9</sup> Ben LoPresti, interview by author on Zoom, June 1, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Robb Esperat, interview by author on Zoom, July 20, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Dan Hardesty, interview by author on Zoom, May 25, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

“They wanted a new chapter, but they also wanted someone who appreciated the past.”<sup>13</sup> Robb Esperat said, “I answered lots of questions like, ‘what are you going to change?’ My answer was always, ‘I am not here to change the DNA of this church’ ... and that was the right answer!”<sup>14</sup> He also noted, “Really, they were not saying it out loud, but I could tell, they wanted someone to carry on Dick’s [preaching] legacy.”<sup>15</sup> Hardesty stated bluntly, “We communicated what would not change, and we affirmed the past before we ever talked about new ideas for the future.”<sup>16</sup> Finally, Garrett Spitz, pastor of PCC, indicated that his congregants combined the importance of continuity with a desire for good preaching:

They wanted alignment with the church’s DNA—theology and philosophy of ministry. Then, they wanted character and gifting. They saw certain degrees of alignment with Tom’s [Tom Kenney, the succeeded pastor] character and gifting, but they were also flexible. They did not expect me to be mini-Tom. However, they thought ‘if things are working with Tom, we should bring in someone like Tom.’ We are both task-oriented, not emotive, and we are teachers.<sup>17</sup>

Good preaching and the ability to effectively manage change are crucial for any pastor’s success, but they are both things pastors *do*. A pastor’s skill or approach in either area tells a search committee very little about who a pastor *is*.

---

<sup>13</sup> Craig Rush, interview by author on Zoom, June 22, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Esperat interview.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Dick Woodward was the founding pastor of VBCC. He was well regarded in the Hampton Roads region of Virginia for his teaching ministry. The VBCC website states, “Dick Woodward was installed as the senior pastor in 1957. Dick would turn out to have an enormous teaching ministry, including regular television and radio programs. He authored the Mini Bible College, which continues to have impact as it is translated and distributed in over 60 countries and 26 languages worldwide” (<https://www.vbcc.church/learn-our-story>).

<sup>16</sup> Hardesty interview.

<sup>17</sup> Garrett Spitz, interview by author on Zoom, July 20, 2023.

In light of these responses, it is clear that search committees desire to present someone to the congregation who looks—at least in the public-facing parts of the job—like they can get the job done. It is even better when that person can get the job done in a manner similar to how it has been done before. In light of the pull toward focusing on the practical “doing” aspects of pastoral ministry, churches must begin their searches by critically considering what winning looks like when it comes to searching for a pastor. This chapter will argue that winning involves making the shift from primarily considering what a pastor should *do*, to emphasizing who a pastor should *be*. To win, churches should look for “one-eyed pastors,” that is pastors who have “a single eye toward the things of God.”<sup>18</sup>

### ***A Lesson from Church History***

The concept of a one-eyed pastor can be traced back to the early church father Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory was an influential bishop in the fourth century. He was one of the chief advocates for Nicene orthodoxy at the ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381 CE.<sup>19</sup> In a letter to the church in Nicomedia, Gregory offered advice on pastoral transition. The church was in the middle of a leadership change; they needed to elect a new bishop. In his careful examination of Gregory’s letter, church historian Christopher A. Beeley writes,

Gregory tells the Nicomedians that their new bishop's “spiritual qualifications” will be far more important than a prestigious family lineage, wealth, powerful

---

<sup>18</sup> Christopher A. Beeley, *Leading God's People: Wisdom from the Early Church for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2012), 29.

<sup>19</sup> Richard A. Norris, trans., *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Writings from the Greco-Roman World (Atlanta, GA : Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), xiii.

friends, or worldly distinction. If they truly desire a wise and strong leader, they must choose a person who has “a single eye to the things of God.”<sup>20</sup>

Gregory of Nyssa, then, was not overly concerned with the practical matters of getting ministry done. Instead, Beeley demonstrates, Gregory was consumed with a different focus: who are pastors supposed to be? Specifically, Gregory of Nyssa believed pastors must have “a single eye to the things of God.” Beeley writes, “What ultimately moves people into a deeper life in Christ is not personal charm, social connections, or managerial expertise, no matter how useful they may seem in the short term. Instead, it is the real and palpable holiness of a leader steeped in the grace of Christ.”<sup>21</sup> In light of the dominant practice to search for pastors who know how to do what the church wants done, Beeley’s insight into Gregory of Nyssa’s perspective is nothing short of countercultural.

If Beeley’s interpretation of Gregory of Nyssa extends to other early church figures, it suggests that twenty-first century church leaders would do well to reconsider their goal-oriented answer to “What is winning?” when looking for new pastors, and emphasize a pastor’s character instead. Beeley’s thesis represents a significant departure from contemporary understandings of the pastorate, but an examination of two additional early church fathers, Gregory of Nazianzus and Ambrose of Milan, suggests that looking for a one-eyed pastor as a viable transition strategy has deep historical roots.

One of the Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nazianzus was widely known for defending the divinity of Jesus. He was the first early church father to call the Holy Spirit “God.” This makes him the earliest historical figure to speak about trinitarian theology in

---

<sup>20</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Letter 13* as cited in Beeley, *Leading God’s People*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

the terms Christians use today.<sup>22</sup> Gregory's *Oration 2* is widely considered "the earliest and most influential work on Christian pastoral ministry."<sup>23</sup>

Though he wrote a bit later, between 377 and 390 CE, Ambrose of Milan is nevertheless still a contemporary of Gregory. He played a significant role in the development of the Nicene Creed. He influenced what testimony was considered during deliberations of the Council, served as a secretary, ensuring accurate transmission of the Creed's contents, and defended the Creed against attacks after the conclusion of the Council of Nicaea.<sup>24</sup> Ambrose was a bishop in Northern Italy, where he sought to pass on his understanding of the pastorate to younger clergy in the region.<sup>25</sup> Ambrose takes on the subject of pastoral ministry in his work *On the Duties of the Clergy* originally titled *De Officiis*. Together, Ambrose and Gregory represent the most ancient authorities on the pastoral role, and they offer insight into the early church's original intentions for its leaders.

### ***Context of the Primary Sources***

Examining Gregory of Nazianzus's *Oration 2* and Ambrose of Milan's *De Officiis* requires an understanding of two things about their context. First, the two works had different intended audiences. Gregory wrote *Oration 2* to his own congregation,

---

<sup>22</sup> Brian J. Matz, *Gregory of Nazianzus, Foundations of Theological Exegesis and Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 1.

<sup>23</sup> Beeley, *Leading God's People*, 143.

<sup>24</sup> Young Richard Kim, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 99, 150, 316.

<sup>25</sup> Ambrose, *De Officiis*, trans. Ivor Davidson, Oxford Early Christian Studies, vol. 1 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 15.

suggesting that his writing was meant to be personal, while Ambrose wrote more formally to the broader ecclesiastical establishment in and around Milan. Second, the two texts also had different interlocutors. Gregory is in dialogue with the Bible. Brian Matz, in his book *Gregory of Nazianzus*, writes, “There are 508 biblical citations in this oration [*Oration 2*] spread across 117 paragraphs. That is an average of nearly five biblical citations in each paragraph. This oration is nothing if not biblical.”<sup>26</sup> Ambrose is in dialogue with classical culture, namely, the ideals of ancient Greek and Roman civilization from around the eighth century BCE until the fall of the Roman Empire near the end of the fifth century CE.

Ambrose borrowed both the title and framework for *De Officiis* from the classical orator and rhetorician, Cicero. Cicero’s work is a treatise on moral duties and practical rules for those with public roles, the *officia*, in classical society. Cicero structures the book according to the four cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance—and frames it all as advice to his son. This is a rhetorical device that reveals his longing for classical ethics to endure for the benefit of future generations.<sup>27</sup> In the introduction to his translation of *De Officiis*, Ivor J. Davidson writes,

Ambrose is thinking above all of the advice given in his literary model, the *De Officiis* of Cicero: he aims to construct a distinct alternative to the ethical principles of secular philosophy, and to show that Christian morality is established on quite different grounds ... The retention of Cicero’s title is part of this deliberate contrast between Christian and pagan versions of the *officia*.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Matz, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 54.

<sup>27</sup> Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller (New York, NY: The Macmillan CO., 1913), ix-x, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ivor J. Davidson, ed. *Ambrose: De Officiis*, Vol.1 of Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.

This is not to say that Ambrose avoids using scripture as he makes his case. *De Officiis* is replete with biblical allusions and arguments from scripture. In *De Officiis*, however, the Bible functions like evidence for Ambrose's argument as he pleads his case within the public square of ideas in classical culture.

Although Gregory of Nazianzus and Ambrose of Milan had different audiences and engaged the Bible in different ways, their treatises on the functions of pastoral ministry confirm that Gregory of Nyssa was not alone in believing that pastors should have a single eye toward the things of God.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, these sources agree that the "things of God" are two-fold. First, there is a personal dimension. The pastor must be committed to holy living. Second, there is a congregational dimension. The pastor must aid the congregation in living faithfully, both institutionally and individually.

According to these sources, it is accurate to summarize the activity of one-eyed pastors like this: they pursue purity. They pursue purity personally, and they help their congregations do the same. Modern connotations of "purity," however, fail to encompass the full range of meaning embedded in these sources. For both Ambrose and Nazianzus, purity is not only about behavior. Rather, it is a way of being completely aligned with the fullness of God's purposes for followers of Jesus. The Wesleyan idea of "practical divinity" helps reveal the more expansive understanding of purity that Ambrose and Gregory held. Will Willimon, a former bishop in the United Methodist Church, unpacks the concept like this:

John Wesley said that Methodism was driven by "practical divinity," theology meant to be practiced, embodied, and enacted. Though a fine enough preacher,

---

<sup>29</sup> Beeley, *Leading God's People*, 29.

Wesley is best remembered as a brilliant strategist who boldly instituted new forms of church in service of mission.<sup>30</sup>

Wesley's practical divinity breaks down the barriers between personal and public piety. It makes clear that the work of the church is to be done in the sanctuary and the streets, and it affirms that our individual faith must lead us to corporate worship and community engagement. This is what pursuing purity looks like for Gregory and Ambrose.

When Moses is dead, the church would do well to ask, are we arranging our search for a new pastor in ways that honor the wisdom of Gregory and Ambrose? Are we looking for pastors with a single eye toward the things of God? Will our search identify pastors who pursue purity? Do we have the systems in place to help us identify these pastors?

### ***Examining the Primary Sources: Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 2***

Gregory's *Oration 2* can be divided thematically into three sections, summarized by Brian Matz as, "Gregory's Flight from the Pastorate," "What Does a Pastor Do?" and, "Who Should Be a Pastor?"<sup>31</sup> The first section of *Oration 2* opens with deep humility. Gregory writes, "I have been defeated, and own my defeat."<sup>32</sup> After his ordination, Gregory became overwhelmed with the task of pastoral ministry. He left his congregation

---

<sup>30</sup> Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), 5; William H. Willimon, *Don't Look Back: Methodist Hope for What Comes Next* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2022), 67.

<sup>31</sup> Matz, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 55, 57, 66.

<sup>32</sup> Gregory Nazianzus, "Oration 2," in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *A Select Library of Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Church, Second Series, Vol. 7: Cyril of Jerusalem and Gregory Nazianzen* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2022), §1. Source edited by Kevin Knight for New Advent, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310202.htm>.



to pursue a monastic life, but eventually returned home and apologized, burdened by a sense of duty. His congregation rejected his first apology as incomplete, so Gregory more humbly owned his defeat and, in *Oration 2*, explained why the idea of becoming a pastor initially overwhelmed him. Matz contends, “this oration ... is really about just one thing: the ideal pastor is one consumed by the task of purification.”<sup>33</sup> Gregory’s opening line, then, indicates that pastors pursuing purity must possess humility.

Today, it is the rare person who takes full responsibility for their actions when apologizing. A ubiquitous example of this is when people include “if I have offended you” as part of their apology. By using the word “if” and placing the onus on the offended to admit their offense, people using this phrase avoid taking direct responsibility for causing harm. The popular podcast, *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, which chronicles the demise of Mars Hill Church and its founding pastor, Mark Driscoll, dedicated a large portion of an episode to the phrase “mistakes were made.” The podcast host, Mike Cospers, reported, “William Sapphire once called the phrase, mistakes were made, the artful dodge of the impersonal apology. It’s passive voice. There’s an admission that something went wrong, but there’s no statement of responsibility.”<sup>34</sup>

The phrase “mistakes were made” is what Hillsong Church Founder Brian Houston used when confronted on the *Today* show about his role in a toxic leadership culture and pastoral moral failure at Hillsong’s New York City location. Houston said, “I’m acknowledging that mistakes have been made and that there are things where we

---

<sup>33</sup> Matz, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 54.

<sup>34</sup> Mike Cospers, “Everything Is Still Falling Apart,” *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* podcast, episode 15, June 17, 2022, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/>.

need to get far better, much better. I'm not shrinking back from that."<sup>35</sup> Houston's failure to take responsibility while simultaneously claiming to "not shrink back" from what happened is too common in the church today. Gregory's example of humility through complete ownership reminds readers that the early church fathers had a different vision for pastoral ministry. For them, the pursuit of purity was not abstract. It was not an intellectual exercise. They demonstrated that pursuing purity requires the application of biblical commands in everyday life. It requires practical divinity.

The theme of humility continues throughout the first section of *Oration 2*. Gregory describes his desire to escape "from the flesh and the world ... and ... to live superior to visible things, ever preserving in myself the divine impressions pure and unmixed with the erring tokens of this lower world."<sup>36</sup> While he was away seeking purification in silence and solitude, however, Gregory came to realize that deeper purification comes when a pastor has the humility to admit his need for the congregation in the purification process. In Gregory's view, pastors must excel in virtue beyond their congregations, but must also have the humility to see that they are not superior to the gathered family of faith. In the providence of God, the pastor and the congregation are purified together. They are to look with a single eye toward the things of God together.

Gregory writes,

[Some] should be the subject to pastoral care and rule, and be guided by word and deed in the path of duty; while others should be pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the church, those, I mean, who surpass the majority in virtue and nearness to God, performing the functions of the soul in the body, and of the intellect in the soul; in order that both may be so united and compacted together,

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration 2*, in Schaff and Wace, §7.

that, although one is lacking and another is pre-eminent, they may, like the members of our bodies, be so combined and knit together by the harmony of the Spirit, as to form a perfect body, really worthy of Christ himself, our Head.<sup>37</sup>

Gregory's flight from the pastorate required the hubris to believe that he could achieve a purer state alone than he could among the community of saints who gathered for weekly worship. His return required the humility to confess this error before the congregation from which he ran.

At the beginning of the second section of *Oration 2*, which deals with the subject of what pastors do, the theme of humility persists. Gregory expresses just how unqualified he feels for the job. He writes, "It is right for us to guard against ... being found bad painters of the charms of virtue, and still more, if not, perhaps, models for poor painters, poor models for the people, or barely escaping the proverb, that we undertake to heal others while we ourselves are full of sores."<sup>38</sup> The standard of virtue required for pastoral ministry troubled his soul.

As the Oration continues, Gregory describes an ever-increasing standard to which pastors are accountable:

Although a man has kept himself pure from sin even in a very high degree; I do not know that even this is sufficient for one who is to instruct others in virtue. For he who has received this charge, not only needs to be free from evil, for evil is, in the eyes of most of those under his care, most disgraceful, but also to be eminent in good, according to the command, "Depart from evil and do good." And he must not only wipe out the traces of vice from his soul, but also inscribe better ones, so as to outstrip men further in virtue than he is superior to them in dignity.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., §3.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., §13.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., §14.

This lofty standard of virtue for those who accept the call to pastoral ministry certainly played a role in Gregory's initial reaction to his ordination. It is admirable that he returned to bind himself to the task without diminishing the standard.

At every turn in *Oration 2*, Gregory increases the gravity of the claims he makes regarding pastoral responsibility. In one passage, Gregory offers an intimidating list of qualifications. A pastor, he argues, "should know no limits in goodness or spiritual progress, and should dwell upon the loss of what is still beyond him, rather than the gain of what he has attained, and consider that which is beneath his feet a step to that which comes next." Furthermore, he must "not think it a great gain to excel ordinary people, but a loss to fall short of what ought to be."<sup>40</sup> Gregory believes that when a pastor progresses in the task of purification, it should only cause him to ponder how far he still must travel. The pastor must not rest in what he has accomplished, but instead must look for how he has fallen short. Gregory leaves no room for a pastor to become prideful that his purity has surpassed others'. God, not others, is the proper standard for purity. Surprisingly in the face of such a daunting standard, Gregory believes that God's desire is for pastors to "tend the flock not by constraint but willingly."<sup>41</sup> The need for a willing heart only compounds the difficulty of an already complex task. It is not only performance that matters, but motivation too.

If the requirements for humility and high standards were not enough to dissuade someone from pursuing the pastoral office, Gregory also demands that pastors who

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., §15.

pursue purification accept responsibility for encouraging purification in the congregation. Fighting what he refers to as “human prudence and selfishness, and the want of training and inclination to yield ready submission,” Gregory contends pastors must nevertheless overcome “a very great obstacle to advance in virtue, amounting almost to an armed resistance to those who wish to help us.”<sup>42</sup> Specifically, pastors must combat their congregants’ persistent denial of their sinful nature, as well as their refusal to seek help from the physician of the soul, their pastoral leader.

Matz, commenting on this theme, writes, “Gregory is looking for language to express the reality that souls are not easily changed for the better because they rationalize away their love for sin.”<sup>43</sup> In Gregory’s words, “we either hide away our sin, cloaking it over in the depth of our soul, like some festering and malignant disease, as if by escaping the notice of men we could escape the mighty eye of God and justice. Or else we allege excuses in our sins, by devising pleas in defense of our falls, or tightly closing our ears.” Comparing congregants to “the deaf adder that stops her ears,” Gregory continues, “we are obstinate in refusing to hear the voice of the charmer, and be treated with the medicines of wisdom, by which spiritual sickness is healed.”<sup>44</sup>

In light of the unique difficulties posed to the pastor by people rationalizing their sin, Gregory begins a discussion comparing the pastoral office—held by physicians of the soul—with the role of physicians of the body. He aims to show the superiority of the physician of the soul as he plumbs the depth of the complexity of the role:

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., §19.

<sup>43</sup> Matz, *Gregory*, 59.

<sup>44</sup> All quotations of Gregory of Nazianzus in this paragraph are from Gregory, *Oration*, §20.

For these reasons I allege that our office as physicians far exceeds in toilsomeness, and consequently in worth, that which is confined to the body; and further, because the latter is mainly concerned with the surface, and only in a slight degree investigates the causes which are deeply hidden. But the whole of our treatment and exertion is concerned with the hidden man of the heart, and our warfare is directed against that adversary and foe within us, who uses ourselves as his weapons against ourselves.<sup>45</sup>

The crux of his argument in this passage is that physicians of the body deal primarily with external and visible matters. The doctor can see the enemy he or she is fighting. In contrast, physicians of the soul deal with “deeply hidden” matters, internal and concealed. The enemy cannot be seen. The enemy within uses a person’s life as a disguise so that for the patient to truly seek health, he must appear to turn against himself. Taking Gregory’s analysis seriously, a reader might ask, “how can one win a war that is both unannounced and unseen?” This is why being a physician of the soul is so difficult, and why the role is so desperately needed for humans to flourish.

The section comparing the physician of the soul with the physician of the body is quite long.<sup>46</sup> It is clear that Gregory sees the pastor’s vocation as far more complex and important than the physician’s vocation. However, Matz points out, “Gregory’s discussion of the physician of the body in each section serves as little more than a literary foil for the physician of the soul.”<sup>47</sup> This does not mean that this section is any less valuable for contemporary readers. The foil of the physician of the body helps us understand Gregory’s overall aims. As Matz contends, “Gregory wants to highlight the perils of the pastor’s work, which, in its own way, further elucidates what Gregory

---

<sup>45</sup> Gregory, *Oration*, §21.

<sup>46</sup> Matz, *Gregory of Nazianus*, 60.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

envision the pastorate to be: an office devoted to the purification of God's people."<sup>48</sup>

The contrast between the two types of physicians builds a bridge to the third section of the Oration. In this section, Gregory articulates the model pastor and makes his final attempt to persuade his congregation to see the value of a pastor with a single eye toward the things of God, and to see the primary role of their pastor in terms of purification.

The third and final section opens with a clear restatement of Gregory's thesis. Gregory argues, "A man must himself be cleansed, before cleansing others: himself become wise, that he may make others wise; become light, and then give light; draw near to God, and so bring others near; be hallowed, then hallow them."<sup>49</sup> Each couplet in the passage reinforces Gregory's view that a pastor's pursuit of purification is a dual assignment. Their first responsibility is to seek purity personally. Their second responsibility is to assist their congregation in the task of purification.

With his argument thoroughly and convincingly restated, Gregory turns toward the practical matter of defining who should be a pastor. What type of person could fulfill all that he articulated regarding the pastoral role, and what kind of character would they need to possess? He addresses these questions by describing the transformation he experienced, which enabled him to return to the pastorate in Nazianzus. He writes, "I gave as an offering my all to him who has won me and saved me, my property, my fame, my health, my very words, from which I only gained the advantage of being able to despise them, and having something in comparison of which I preferred Christ."<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration*, in Schaff and Wace, §71.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. §77.

Gregory's transformation required that he surrender to Christ. Who should be a pastor? In Gregory's estimation, only the surrendered are capable of fulfilling the office.

This claim may cause concern among those who take up the pastoral office today. They may be struck with the same fear that caused Gregory's flight from the ministry. We should take note that surrender did not bring grief to Gregory's life. Rather, he experienced joy. He began to prefer Christ to all the things he gave up. He writes, "My longing grew ... and my reason agreed to it."<sup>51</sup> The pastoral calling, heavy as Gregory presents it to be, unfolds in stages. While surrender is required, it often comes gradually. Gregory's experience preparing for pastoral leadership unfolded in three stages: first, he surrendered. Second, his desires were transformed. Third, his actions changed. Gregory uses a compelling illustration from art—the time-intensive art form of sculpture—to affirm that the transformation process required for pastoral ministry is similarly time intensive. He writes,

Who can mould, as clay-figures are modelled in a single day, the defender of the truth, who is to take his stand with Angels, and give glory with Archangels, and cause the sacrifice to ascend to the altar on high, and share the priesthood of Christ, and renew the creature, and set forth the image, and create inhabitants for the world above?<sup>52</sup>

While one can mold a clay figure in a day, Gregory asserts the complexity of the pastoral role requires a greater investment of time to properly shape the pastor. The three stages of Gregory's transformation were not quick fixes to his character. This quote brings Gregory back to an oft-repeated theme in the Oration: pastoral ministry is exceedingly

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., §73.



difficult, and therefore, takes time to master. It is the highest calling and requires the greatest skill. The idea that the work of pastors is to “create inhabitants for the world above” is surely why Gregory called pastoral ministry “the art of arts and the science of sciences.”<sup>53</sup>

In addition, Matz argues that the stages of transformation, and the time it takes to work through them, demonstrate one of the core characteristics of a purified pastor: patience. He writes, “They are not troubled by the slowness of the process. Haste in purification is nothing more than seed falling on rocky soil ... and a house built on shifting sand. People too eager for the pastorate ought to heed the warnings of Solomon, who in Ecclesiastes 10:16 and Proverbs 29:20 pronounced woes against hasty demand for authority.”<sup>54</sup> Because of the many obstacles pastors and congregations face on the road to purity, patience is an essential companion for the journey.

In light of this concept, the third section of Gregory’s *Oration 2*, which Matz titles “Who Should Be a Pastor,” might more accurately be called “Who Should Not Be a Pastor?”<sup>55</sup> Those who grasp for pastoral authority betray their low view of the responsibility of the office. Ironically, Gregory’s flight from the pastorate revealed how highly he thought of the pastoral role; Gregory’s belief that he was unqualified was precisely what qualified him.

A close reading of *Oration 2* leaves us with several questions: How does Gregory’s work compare with his contemporaries’? Is Gregory’s perspective unique

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., §16.

<sup>54</sup> Matz, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 66.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

among writers in the fourth century CE? Is Gregory's thesis that "pastors pursue purity" affirmed by other church fathers? To answer these questions, we turn to the writing of Ambrose of Milan.

### ***Examining the Primary Sources: Ambrose of Milan, De Officiis***

Ambrose of Milan is an additional ancient author who, like Gregory, wrote about the nature of the pastorate. He takes up the subject in his work *De Officiis*. While scholars cannot date *De Officiis* precisely, Ivor J. Davidson, in his introduction to Ambrose's work, cites two historical events from which he concludes 386 CE as the approximate "publication date."<sup>56</sup> This places Ambrose's work roughly in the same time period as Gregory's *Oration 2*.

The two authors wrote within a few decades of one another (Gregory first, then Ambrose), but their audiences and intentions were different. Gregory's audience was his congregation, and his chief dialogue partner was the biblical canon. He recounted his personal reasons for fleeing from the pastorate to an audience of unordained lay people. By sharing his reasons, he spotlighted his vision for the pastorate. His words also help contemporary readers understand various conceptions of the pastoral office that were popular in the fourth century. Throughout *Oration 2*, Gregory appeals to the authority of Christian scripture as he unpacks his understanding of the pastorate.

Ambrose, by contrast, wrote to ordained clergy, explicitly instructing them regarding the duties of their office. As Davidson describes, "Cicero's style of writing as

---

<sup>56</sup> Davidson, *De Officiis*, 4-5.

father to son is directly imitated ... Ambrose addresses his spiritual ‘sons,’ offering them fatherly guidance.”<sup>57</sup> Although “spiritual sons” were his stated audience, Ambrose may have sought to reach an audience beyond the boundaries of the church as well. His title, alluding to one of classical culture’s greatest works, was likely intended to arouse the curiosity of the intellectual class around Milan and Rome.<sup>58</sup>

Ambrose’s chief dialogue partner was the classical tradition. Davidson writes, “The *officia* of the clerical life are pointedly compared with the responsibilities enjoyed upon those who engage in the service of the *saeculum*. Ambrose is thinking above all of the advice given in his literary model, the *De Officiis* of Cicero.”<sup>59</sup> Ambrose, however, grounded his work in the classical tradition in order to demonstrate that the Christian tradition was superior to classical ethics.

This is not to say that the Bible plays a background role in Ambrose’s writing. Like Gregory, he fills his writing with biblical allusions, particularly in his advice to clergy on silence. In addition, Ambrose claims the inspiration to write *De Officiis* came while reading scripture. He writes, “Whilst, therefore, meditating on this psalm, it has come to my mind to write ‘on the duties.’”<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>58</sup> Davidson, *De Officiis*, 62-63. Davidson sees a wide potential readership for *De Officiis*, including clergy beyond Milan and lay Christians. In addition, he writes, “Ambrose undoubtedly has in his sights a very different group of potential readers too, non-Christian *literati* among the intelligentsia of Milan and Rome. Such ‘leisured sophisticates’ would undoubtedly have been keen to observe the intellectual stance adopted by any prominent churchman venturing a transformation of a central text from the classical canon.”

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>60</sup> Ambrose, *On the Duties of Clergy*, trans. Rev. H. De Romestrin (Oxford, UK: Benediction Classics, 2010), 46.

Although Ambrose's audience and context were different, his argument is almost identical to Gregory's. In Davidson's words, "Ambrose's effort to issue practical advice involves an unabashed appeal to perfection as the only applicable target for the moral agent dedicated to Christian service."<sup>61</sup> Stated simply, pastors pursue purity and must have a single eye toward the things of God.

Like Gregory, Ambrose begins his work by voicing a similar reluctance toward accepting the call to pastoral ministry: "For we can no longer now escape from the duty of teaching which the needs of the priesthood have laid upon us, though we tried to avoid it."<sup>62</sup> Here, Ambrose confirms what we saw in Gregory: the qualification for the pastorate is to know that you are not qualified for the pastorate.

After establishing human inadequacy for God's work in the church, Ambrose offers his fatherly advice to young clergy. He begins with a call to silence: "Now what ought we to learn before everything else, but to be silent, that we may be able to speak."<sup>63</sup> Ambrose's call to silence is connected to two aspects of his "unabashed appeal to perfection." First, he believes as Gregory does, that a pastor does not pursue perfection only for himself. Rather, pastors pursue purity, or perfection, personally and for their congregations. Silence is the essential ground of learning. Silence is what eventually enables the pastor to teach, aiding their congregation in the pursuit of purity. This is why Ambrose connects silence and speech, though the connection may seem odd. Silence is not the end goal; accurate teaching is the aim of silence.

---

<sup>61</sup> Davidson, *De Officiis*, 19.

<sup>62</sup> Ambrose, *On the Duties*, 33.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

Ambrose also advocates for silence because he sees speech as dangerous. In speech, sin flourishes. He writes, “What need is there, then, that thou shouldest hasten to undergo the danger of condemnation by speaking, when thou canst be more safe by keeping silent? How many have I seen fall into sin by speaking, but scarcely one by keeping silent.”<sup>64</sup> Even as Ambrose prescribes silence for clergy, he still acknowledges “the duty of teaching” that pastors must embrace in order to purify their congregations.<sup>65</sup> In Ambrose’s opinion, silence safeguards clergy against the sinning that can damage their personal purity, and it allows them to engage in deep learning so they can become teachers who purify.

One additional aspect of Ambrose’s call to silence requires comment. While the whole of Ambrose’s work builds on the classical ethical tradition, Ambrose appeals to scripture to make his case regarding the need for pastors to practice silence. He tells readers that scripture instructs, “A wise man will keep silence until there is opportunity,” and explains, “one can take heed if one is not hasty in speaking.” To provide evidence for his claim, Ambrose draws on a broad range of scripture. First, Ambrose cites, “the law says, ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord thy God.’ It said not: ‘Speak,’ but ‘Hear.’ Eve fell because she said to the man what she had not heard from the Lord her God.” Ambrose continues, “Let us then guard our hearts, let us guard our mouths. Both have been written about ... ‘Keep thy heart with all diligence.’ If David took heed, wilt thou not take heed?” And finally, “If Isaiah had unclean lips—who said: ‘Woe is me, for I am undone, for I am a

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 33.

man, and have unclean lips’—if a prophet of the Lord had unclean lips, how shall we have them clean?”<sup>66</sup> In this section alone, Ambrose provides five passages of scripture to undergird his call to clergy for silence. He uses biblical figures to point out that if these paragons of faith were advised to be silent, then clergy, weaker in faith, must attend doubly to the discipline of silence.

After the discussion of silence, Ambrose claims the word “duty” for the Christian tradition by locating it in the Bible and applying it to the work of the clergy to whom he is writing. Arguing against classical culture’s monopoly on duty, he writes,

We are confirmed in our view, that the word *officium*, ‘duty,’ may also be used with us. For when Zachariah the priest was struck dumb in the temple, and could not speak, it is said: ‘And it came to pass that as soon as the days of his duty (*officii*) were accomplished, he departed to his own house.’<sup>67</sup>

“Therefore,” Ambrose concludes, “the word *officium*, ‘duty,’ can be used by us.”<sup>68</sup> With this simple philological maneuver, Ambrose engages the classical tradition on equal footing. Just as Gregory sought to dislodge the esteemed “physicians of the body,” Ambrose shows the superiority of the virtues to which clergy must adhere in order to fulfill their purpose as purifiers.

Ambrose also makes an argument using chronology to subordinate the classical tradition to the Christian tradition. He explains,

Pythagoras himself, who lived before the time of Socrates, followed the prophet David’s steps and gave his disciples a law of silence. He went so far as to restrain his disciples from the use of speech for five years. David, on the other hand, gave

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 35-39.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

his law not with a view to impair the gift of nature, but to teach us to take heed to the words we utter.<sup>69</sup>

Ambrose claims that because David came before Pythagoras, Pythagoras is borrowing from David, and, Ambrose points out, is doing so quite poorly. David is the original; Pythagoras is a dull facsimile. Ambrose believed the truth of biblical faith was woven into classical culture in ways the intelligentsia of the day were blind to.

After working through each of the four cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance—that were also the basis of Cicero’s *De Officiis*, Ambrose comes back to the Bible to demonstrate the even higher calling of pastoral office.<sup>70</sup> He writes,

Wherefore the Apostle, when he said: “A bishop should be sober, modest, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach, not covetous, nor a brawler, one that rules well his own house,” also added: “Likewise must the deacons be grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre, holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let them also first be proved, and so let them serve, being found blameless.” We note how much is required of us.<sup>71</sup>

Even after this biblical list and his comment regarding the severity of what was required of pastors, Ambrose adds another requirement: “The minister of the Lord should abstain from wine, so that he may be upheld by good witness not only of the faithful but also by those who are without ... that the office be not disgraced.”<sup>72</sup> Whatever standard classical ethics set for the duties of the *saeculum*, Ambrose raised the bar and claimed the duties of clergy were more virtuous still.

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

The admonishment for clergy to not disgrace the office also demonstrates Ambrose and Gregory's unity of mind that the primary goal of clergy was purification. As Ambrose concludes the first book of *De Officiis*, he reiterates his thesis that a pastor's responsibility is to pursue purity, for themselves and for their congregation. He argues, "Thou must have a pure body wherewith to offer up the sacraments."<sup>73</sup> He explicitly connects the task of clergy and congregational purification to the classical, cardinal virtues:

Good Levites have ever preserved the mystery entrusted to them under the protection of their own faith, and yet dost thou think little of what is entrusted to thee? First, thou shalt see the deep things of God, which needs wisdom. Next, thou must keep watch for the people; this requires justice. Thou must defend the camp and guard the tabernacle which needs fortitude. Thou must show thyself continent and sober, and this needs temperance.<sup>74</sup>

While the clergy and the *saeculum* both hold the cardinal virtues in high regard, Ambrose presents his readers with the idea that these virtues, when deployed by the clergy, are in service of something much greater. There is a "mystery entrusted to them," greater than even the mystery entrusted to the Levites. The Levites assisted in sacrifices to atone for sin. Christian clergy point people to the greater mystery that in the death of Christ lies the door to new life. In Ambrose's view, there is only one foundation fortified enough to hold the weight of this mystery: "The building ... cannot stand unless it [has] a foundation. The foundation is Christ."<sup>75</sup> The whole Christian tradition is grounded in and points toward Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.



With this statement, Ambrose shows the classical cardinal virtues alone cannot bear the weight of a virtuous life. A firmer foundation is required. Here he takes a significant step toward showing the Christian tradition to be superior to the classical tradition. Furthermore, Ambrose's idea that Christ is the foundation for Christian ethics aligns him with Gregory's vision of the pastor as purifier, fully dependent on Christ for his purification and for the purification of his congregation.

### *The Outlier in the Consortium*

When I asked, "What do you believe was most important to your church in looking for a pastor?" the great majority of the responses focused on the practical skills required for pastoral ministry. There was, however, one outlier who spoke about the character his church longed to see in their pastor. When asked the question, Chris Williams, pastor of CCC, unflinchingly said, "Personal humility."<sup>76</sup> He then quoted the South African writer, teacher, and pastor, Andrew Murray, who claimed, "Humility is the virtue that enables all other virtues."<sup>77</sup> When I asked Williams to expound upon his answer, he replied,

What opens the door to the fruit of the Spirit or the characteristics of an overseer? Humility impacts how you handle the Word, work with elders, and understand that this is Jesus's church, not mine. Pastors too interested in legacy can easily creep into empire-building. When people ask, "What will people think of me when I am gone, or where are my fingerprints?" this has the subtle undertones of pride. Sometimes churches are looking for a visionary pastor, but that can creep into this kind of legacy-building. A pastor must be able to say, "I could be wrong." They must know, I am not the only voice in the room. The elders need to be tuned into this ... they must go layers deep and do a gut check on humility. I

---

<sup>76</sup> Chris Williams, interview by author on Zoom, June 15, 2023.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

think vision is needed, but I can also be skeptical of vision because vision can also be an agenda. My heart has transitioned toward less measurable ways of thinking about success. Did I shepherd well today? Did I handle the Word with humility today?<sup>78</sup>

These are the thoughts of a pastor committed to pursuing purity. His statements give us a glimpse of what a one-eyed pastor looks like.

### ***When Moses Found a One-Eyed Leader***

The Bible never records the moment Moses knew that Joshua should be his successor, but it is clear that Joshua served as Moses's assistant from a very young age.<sup>79</sup> Consequently, Moses had ample opportunity to observe Joshua's character. Did Joshua have a single eye toward the things of God, or was he distracted by worldly comforts and caught up in trivial pursuits? Joshua's courage to battle Amalek, readiness to ascend the mountain of God, and steadiness while keeping watch at the tent of meeting were early clues to Moses that God had given him a one-eyed leader in Joshua.<sup>80</sup> In Numbers 13–14, Joshua's steadfastness when faced with an intense pressure campaign to disobey God's command to enter the Promised Land revealed that these early signs of faithfulness pointed to Joshua's deep well of character. The virtues Joshua started with only compounded through years of serving alongside Moses.

In Numbers 13, Israel is at the edge of the Promised Land. Their wilderness-wandering is on the verge of ending. Scripture reads, "The LORD said to Moses, 'Send

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Numbers 11:28.

<sup>80</sup> Exodus 17:10; Exodus 24:13; Exodus 33:11.

men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites; from each of their ancestral tribes you shall send a man, every one a leader among them.”<sup>81</sup> God both reminds Moses of the gift of the land and commands preparations be made to receive it. While the land is a gift, faithfulness is a prerequisite to possess it.

The spies return with a foreboding testimony of fortified cities occupied by giants. There is an initial attempt by one of the spies, Caleb, to calm the people with words of assurance. He says, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.”<sup>82</sup> Immediately, however, ten other spies contradict him. They launch a disinformation campaign, and the people clamor to turn away from God’s gift of the land.<sup>83</sup>

Systematic theologian David Stubbs argues that the book of Numbers’ structure points to this moment as the height of Israel’s unfaithfulness. He writes,

This fourth rebellion is the crux of Israel’s rebellions in the Wilderness. It forms the center of the sevenfold pattern of Israel’s unfaithfulness toward God in Numbers, it is the longest of the rebellions, and it is the most serious, both in terms of the offense against God and the punishment given in response to it. It is Israel’s darkest hour.<sup>84</sup>

Stubbs also cites two retellings of Israel’s journey through the wilderness in Deuteronomy that demonstrate the significance of the fourth rebellion. In both cases, the fourth rebellion was the only story from among the seven rebellious incidents shared with future generations.<sup>85</sup> The worst of Israel’s rebellions was not only an affront to God’s

---

<sup>81</sup> Numbers 13:1-2 (NRSV).

<sup>82</sup> Numbers 13:30 (NRSV).

<sup>83</sup> Numbers 13:31-14:2.

<sup>84</sup> David L. Stubbs, *Numbers*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 126.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

command, but a challenge to Israel’s leaders. As written in Numbers, “the entire community” questioned God’s decision to bring them to the Promised Land, then “they said to each other, ‘Let’s pick a leader and let’s go back to Egypt.’”<sup>86</sup>

So, how did Joshua react in the face of such a difficult moment? Did he still have a single eye toward the things of God even when it became hard to see in the darkest hour? Joshua told the Israelites,

The land that we went through as spies is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only, do not rebel against the LORD; and do not fear the people of the land, for they are no more than bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.<sup>87</sup>

At this intersection of faithfulness and unfaithfulness, of the Promised Land and a return to Egypt, of courage and capitulation, Joshua maintained his focus on the singular promise of God: “The land of Canaan, which I [God] am giving to the Israelites.”<sup>88</sup>

Joshua’s single eye was especially important in the context of a challenge to Moses’s leadership. Joshua would have been an appealing candidate to lead the people due to his long-term apprenticeship at the highest levels of the community’s ranks. Instead of grasping for the power that was not yet his, Joshua remained focused on God’s assignment for the people. At a moment when he could have seized power for himself, Joshua instead recognized the people’s doubt as a rebellion toward God and worked to remind the Israelites of God’s promise. Stubbs unpacks Joshua’s and Caleb’s—the only

---

<sup>86</sup> Numbers 14:2-4 (CEB).

<sup>87</sup> Numbers 14:7-9 (NRSV).

<sup>88</sup> Numbers 13:2 (NRSV).

other spy to advocate a move into the Promised Land—faithfulness with an emphasis on their vision:

They first of all act as trustworthy and faithful witnesses to the goodness of God. They tell the people that the goal of their journey, the land in which they will live as God's people, is 'exceedingly good' (14:7). They also rightly declare their trust in the power and care of God ... And they rightly see that the actions of Israel are a rebellion against God. Their trust in God helps them to see the good of the future that God intends for them and also gives them the courage, energy, and hope to confront the obstacles that lay in their path. They are exemplary in their leadership and witness."<sup>89</sup>

Stubbs uses several terms that relate to sight: Joshua is a “witness;” he “rightly sees,” and, they “see the good of the future.” The community responded to Joshua’s clear-eyed vision by attempting to end his life via stoning. In the end, God intervened, and Joshua’s single eye toward the things of God was preserved for a future assignment requiring a one-eyed leader. Perhaps this was the moment when Moses noticed how many eyes Joshua had.

### ***Jesus With a Suit On***

I served as the interim lead pastor of WCC for eighteen months before being called to the role permanently. I sat in the board meetings when the search committee, chaired by a board member, delivered their reports, giving me a front-row seat to the search process. The committee, and even the board, often had a difficult time articulating what they were looking for in the next lead pastor. To put these conversations in the language of Lafley and Martin, no one had a clear answer to the question, what is winning? No one knew what they were actually looking for.

---

<sup>89</sup> Stubbs, *Numbers*, 131.

After several meetings where no consensus emerged, someone finally found the language to describe the issue. A seasoned churchman quipped, “The way you all are talking about this it sounds like you are looking for Jesus with a suit on.” His insight, tinged with humor, highlighted the need for a specific, realistic set of traits to seek in pastoral candidates. The committee and board accepted a more reasonable profile against which to evaluate candidates. But what if things could have been even simpler? What if the search had been informed by the insights of Ambrose, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa? What if we had made a commitment to look for one-eyed pastors? Simply put, what if we had looked for pastors who pursue purity? Regardless of what a congregation needs *done*, a pastor whose *being* includes a single eye toward the things of God is the win every church needs.

## Chapter 3

### Deploy a Prophet, Priest, and King

My second daughter went through a Lego phase, as many children do. She dutifully worked through the step-by-step directions which, if followed properly, never failed to produce the box's promised result. Whether a car, an island getaway, or a scene from Harry Potter, following the directions got the job done. If something seemed wrong at the end of the build, all she had to do was retrace her steps, determine where she had failed to follow the directions, and correct the mistake. Could clear, detailed directions make succession planning in the independent church context as predictable as a Lego build?

Bryant Wright, the succeeded pastor of Johnson Ferry Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, took the step-by-step approach in his coauthored book, *Succession: Preparing Your Ministry for the Next Leader*. *Succession* is a how-to book intended to help other congregations with their own leadership transitions. Wright details everything from his first meeting with the elders to discuss succession, to the composition of the search committee, to details as minute as how the church housed his successor and coauthor, Clay Smith, so that he could get his kids registered for school on time. Wright even reveals the goals for his final sermon as well as his approach to coaching Smith on his first sermon.<sup>1</sup> When asked if the transition process at his church was successful, Wright

---

<sup>1</sup> Bryant Wright and Clay Smith, *Succession: Preparing Your Ministry for the Next Leader* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2022).

answered, “The transition couldn’t have gone better.”<sup>2</sup> If a church is looking for a clear process to follow, Wright’s book purports to offer one.

As discussed in previous chapters, lack of planning is a core weakness for churches when it comes to succession. Poorly planned transitions can lead to confusing and chaotic seasons that take churches years to recover from, and they can also levy additional physical, spiritual, and emotional taxes on the incoming leader, diminishing the potential for a successful transition. Current pastors and boards who want to offer their next leader the gift of a planned succession may need to begin their initial work as many as ten years prior to a pastor’s departure.<sup>3</sup> Ostensibly, the duration and complexity of pastoral transitions point to the need for clear step-by-step instructions.

Before we make the pastoral transition process analogous to a Lego build, however, it is important to note that Wright offers one caveat to his bullish take on the success of his transition plan with the phrase, “Time will tell.”<sup>4</sup> His full evaluation of the process offers more nuance than his quotable “couldn’t have gone better” assessment. He writes, “People have asked—how did the transition go from one pastor to the next? The stats show that the successor who follows a long-tenured founding pastor has the lowest

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>3</sup> Vanderbloemen and Bird, *Next*, 163-164. In this section, the succession consultants make three important observations about the time required to develop a proper transition plan: “Succession conversations should start sooner than most would guess;” “Succession typically takes longer than most would guess;” and, “Churches . . . need ten years to cultivate a strong culture of leadership development at all levels.

<sup>4</sup> Wright in Wright and Smith, *Succession*, 109.



chance of success. My answer is, ‘Time will tell, but the transition couldn’t have gone better.’”<sup>5</sup>

Wright is correct; time always tells. Time, without exception, reveals the suitability of an approach to a particular task. In the case of pastoral transitions, time often exposes a key aspect of the transition that went unaddressed, creating a vulnerability for the successor, the congregation, or both. While a step-by-step plan can predictably guide a succession process to its conclusion, it takes a different approach to attend to the myriad spiritual, emotional, and organizational needs of a congregation in transition. While step-by-step instructions may offer a completed transition, they do not guarantee a successful one.

This chapter will argue that instead of creating step-by-step lists of tasks, which often go undone, or planning for deadlines, which are often moved or missed, boards and pastors should deploy roles. Specifically, churches must deploy leaders to serve in the roles that Jesus filled: prophet, priest, and king. Empowering leaders in this way is the second crucial strategy for churches—particularly independent churches—moving through the transition process. Deploying a prophet, priest, and king increases attention to the “time will tell” issues every succession is eventually subjected to.

In 1 Peter 5, the Apostle Peter speaks directly to those who lead congregations. He uses the analogy of a shepherd guiding a flock to describe pastoral leadership, and he exhorts pastors to pattern their lives after the life of Jesus. He then promises great reward

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

“when the chief shepherd appears.”<sup>6</sup> In Peter’s estimation, all pastors are under-shepherds; their job is to lead like Jesus. Therefore, all pastoral leadership must be Christocentric leadership. If a church is going to find someone who leads like Jesus, then, they should search for that person by deploying the roles of Jesus.

Dan Allender, a Christian therapist and theologian, identifies three distinct roles of Jesus: “Jesus was ... a disruptive prophet to the self-righteous. He was a tender priest who offered the forgiveness of sin to the prostitute. And to the hungry and sick, he was a king who provided for them and protected them from harm.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, there is broad agreement across the breadth of Christian traditions that Jesus Christ fulfilled three offices: prophet, priest, and king.<sup>8</sup> This insight from the discipline of systematic theology can help church boards develop contextualized succession plans that move beyond simple step-by-step approaches.

The three roles of prophet, priest, and king were rooted in the biblical tradition long before Jesus embodied all three together. Curtis Freeman, a professor of theology at Duke Divinity School, contends that in the Old Testament, the word of God was mediated through three types of leaders: prophets, priests, and kings.<sup>9</sup> Each type of leader was set apart from the rest of Israel and symbolically joined together through the ritual of anointing. The priest was anointed to perform the rituals of the covenant and the

---

<sup>6</sup> 1 Peter 5:4 (NRSV).

<sup>7</sup> Dan B. Allender, *Leading with a Limp: Take Full Advantage of Your Most Powerful Weakness* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2006), 185-186.

<sup>8</sup> Curtis W. Freeman, “What is Christian Leadership?” (lecture, Christian Theology 904, Duke Divinity School, August 15, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

reconciling acts of God’s faithfulness. The prophet was anointed to proclaim the word of God and call the people to covenant fidelity. The king was anointed to govern the people as God’s personal regent.<sup>10</sup> The prophet, priest, and king were the three ministers of the covenant, where covenant was understood to represent the relationship between God and Israel and to be the ideal for the Israelites’ relationships with one another.<sup>11</sup> In addition to being a lens through which to understand the historical ideals of ancient Israelite community, the three covenantal roles of the Old Testament also have the capacity to serve as building blocks to construct a flourishing community today.

According to Freeman, each leader embodies a question and a characteristic. The prophet asks, “Where should we be?” and embodies the characteristic of imagination. The priest asks, “Where are we?” and embodies vulnerability. Finally, the king asks, “Where can we be?” and embodies transformation.<sup>12</sup> The questions help spark reflection; the character traits ground that reflection in the life of a particular community and help the community move from reflection to action.

Successfully moving through a pastoral transition apart from a wooden step-by-step process requires each of the questions and characteristics that Freeman outlines. The priestly question, “Where are we?” grounds the process in the reality of the present moment. The prophetic question, “Where should we be?” allows a congregation to

---

<sup>10</sup> See 1 Kings 19:15-16 (NRSV) for the anointing of a prophet; Exodus 29:7 (NRSV) for a priest; and, 1 Samuel 16:12-13 (NRSV) for a King.

<sup>11</sup> George Mendenhall and Gary Herion, “Covenant,” entry in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol. 1: A–C*, ed. By David Freedman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 1179. In their discussion of the term “covenant,” biblical scholars George Mendenhall and Gary Herion argue, “Covenant in the Bible is the major metaphor used to describe the relation between God and Israel ... and therefore is a valuable lens through which one can recognize and appreciate the biblical ideal of religious community.”

<sup>12</sup> Freeman, “Christian Leadership.”

consider their ideal future state. The royal question, “Where can we be?” ensures a congregation’s desires for the future are attainable rather than solely aspirational.

Meanwhile, the character trait of imagination injects creativity into the process. It helps congregations consider new paths and possibilities that may not be the designated next steps in a predetermined process. Pastoral transitions also require vulnerability; leaders must share honestly with the congregation regarding its current state because looking in the mirror is daunting. The vulnerable leader helps people feel secure enough to take a sober look. Finally, transformational leadership is necessary for congregations to have the courage to walk into the future God has prepared for them rather than falling back on the stories of past successes.

Professor Freeman notes that no single person in Israel fulfilled all three offices.<sup>13</sup> If no one in Israel fulfilled the three anointed covenant leadership roles, churches would be wise to seek a plurality of leaders to attend to each of the questions and characteristics embodied in the three-fold office. When Moses is dead, the second effective strategy for pastoral transition is to identify the individuals, or groups of individuals, equipped to fulfill the roles of prophet, priest, and king, and then deploy them to do the work of their assigned roles.<sup>14</sup> These leaders should ask and answer their role’s question and embody their role’s character trait as they lead the congregation through transition. By thinking in terms of roles instead of step-by-step directions, churches will end up with a far more

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Throughout this chapter, the term “king” should be understood metaphorically. The author does not intend to communicate that this role should be filled exclusively by men.

contextually appropriate transition plan that attends to the short term, mid-range, and future-focused needs of their specific congregation.

What would deploying these offices look like practically during a transition process? How do these questions eventually become concrete plans? What does leadership that embodies these character traits look like? Finally, which tasks would each office be responsible for? Answering these questions begins with an in-depth examination of the role of the king. The institution-building work required of kings begins long before a pastor announces her departure or the board decides it is time for the pastor to leave. The prophetic role comes next to consider the future direction of the church. Finally, the priest is addressed last to ensure wholistic care is offered to the congregation throughout the entire process.

### ***Deploying the King***

The king's work is institution-building work. Institutions in the independent church context are the resources—human, physical, or capital—that protect and stabilize a congregation. Successions that succeed in the long run require robust institutional support. Institutions have the capacity to guard against the emotional volatility of the moment. They keep necessary church functions operating smoothly, allowing a new leader the time and space to implement difficult decisions. They act as a governor on the pace of change and maintain a sense of familiarity so that people do not feel like everything is changing simultaneously. New Testament scholar Kavin Rowe argues that

the creation of institutions was a key part of Christianity's early success.<sup>15</sup> He notes, however, that contemporary Christians and early Christians think about institutions quite differently. Modern Christians often view institutions as bureaucratic, innovation-diminishing norm enforcers, but Rowe claims early Christians had a different vision. He writes,

Instead, the earliest Christians were “thinking institutionally,” which means that they were thinking through the basic issues of their common life and mission with a series of important questions: What things do we have to have in place to be and remain who we are ...? What must be retained from what we already have, and what must be newly developed? What habits do we have to cultivate in our people and how do we get these habits into practice in an environment of rapid growth? In short, what must be there for us to be us?<sup>16</sup>

Every congregation has unique identity markers. In the early church, a commitment to care for widows, regardless of ethnicity, led to the institution of the diaconate by the apostles.<sup>17</sup> In the first century, “for us to be us” meant the establishment of a formalized arm of service. In the Hampton Roads Consortium, each church maintains a deep commitment to global missions. For us to be us, Consortium churches often prioritize hiring a mission or outreach director once a church grows large enough to become a multi-staff congregation. The answers to Rowe's questions, especially what must be there for us to be us, cannot be adequately addressed during one offsite retreat and implemented in a few months. Answering these kinds of questions takes years of planning and prudent financial management before the need for a new pastor even arises.

---

<sup>15</sup> C. Kavin Rowe, *Christianity's Surprise: A Sure and Certain Hope* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020), 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>17</sup> See Acts 6:1-7. The English word “diaconate” is derived from the Greek word “*diakoneo*,” used in Acts 6:2. It means servant.

This is the type of institutional work that the king is deployed to manage. When done well, the king shortens the distance between the answer to the prophetic question, “What *should* be?” and the royal question, “What *can* be?” when the moment of transition arises. The king ensures that the pragmatic requirements are in place to allow a church to reach its goals for the future.

There are at least two aspects to Rowe’s summary question, “What must be there for us to be us?” that royally minded leaders must consider in the pastoral transition process. The first is related to finances and the second to candidate sourcing. That is, “How will we save for our future ‘Moses is dead’ moment?” and “What are we doing today to create the potential pastoral leaders of tomorrow?” Since adequate resources can address a multitude of candidate-sourcing issues, the financial question should be addressed first.

Hiring a pastor can be expensive. Succession consultants William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird devote a full chapter in their book to the expenses involved in pastoral transitions. When considering the financial cost of severance for the departing pastor, legal fees (if it is a messy separation), moving expenses for the new pastor, funds to care for the search committee, travel expenses for candidates, and the potential need to hire a professional search firm, the expenses of a well-planned transition can easily exceed six figures.<sup>18</sup> The number of churches that can cover upward of \$100,000 of unexpected costs is quite small. Removing both the largest and smallest from the sample of Hampton

---

<sup>18</sup> William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird, *Next: Pastoral Succession that Works*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 160-162. Note that all other citations of Vanderbloemen and Bird refer to the second edition.

Roads Consortium budgets, the churches have an average budget of \$936,000.

Vanderbloemen and Bird's lowest expense estimate would represent more than ten percent of these churches' budgets. In practice, both Tab and Eastside required financial assistance to secure a professional search firm to help with their transitions.

The leader deployed to serve in the role of king should plan diligently for these expenses. While every church has a different timeline for their succession process and encounters different expenses, based on Vanderbloemen and Bird's analysis, saving anywhere from \$500 to \$1,500 per month over the course of a decade is prudent.<sup>19</sup> A church should consider the scope of their needs as well as their ability to wisely invest their resources when determining their savings goal. Whatever amount a church chooses, a royal leader's intentional, regular, systematic, and lengthy plan for saving money will ensure that a church is not scrambling financially during an already tenuous situation.

Church budgets are always stretched. The idea of carving out additional funds for a far-off future event might be a tough sell for many church boards. However, considering all that rises and falls on a good pastoral transition, there is a clear case to be made that this type of royal leadership in financial planning is essential for every church. Bad hires and botched transitions come with their own set of costs. A reputable crisis consultant once advised me to offer a minimum of six months' severance to any employee who loses their job, regardless of the reason they are leaving the team. Beyond the simple "dollars and cents" of severance packages, churches should also consider the effect intangible cultural issues have on the tangible bottom line. Lost momentum can

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.



lead to lost congregants, which in turn leads to lost tithing and lost opportunities for mission. Lost opportunities for mission lead right back to more lost congregants. The pattern is cyclical, and the cycle picks up speed the longer it goes unchecked. Taking these dynamics into consideration, Vanderbloemen and Bird note, “Smart churches will make every effort possible to mitigate the likelihood of a bad succession by planning early and reviewing often.”<sup>20</sup> In the pastoral search process, the king should lead both the early planning efforts and the consistent review of the process with the church’s overseeing board.

In addition to managing financing, royal leaders must also create systems to source candidates for future pastoral hires. A viable and cost-effective way to accomplish this goal is through ministerial internships. Internships expose future pastoral candidates to the breadth of a church’s ministry across multiple departments and disciplines, and could be divided in several ways, including into the three-fold office framework. The deployed king would be responsible for developing the program according to the context of the church. Sourcing candidates through internships is an effective way to deal with the inevitable transitions every church faces.

In addition to generating future candidates who are already well-acquainted with a church’s ministry and culture, internships could also play a key role in resolving another dilemma churches face when hiring new leaders: whether it is better to hire someone from within the organization or someone from outside it. Internships have the potential to bridge the insider/outsider divide by bringing more outsiders into the orbit of the church.

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 157.

This affords churches the opportunity to train people unfamiliar with their ministries to appreciate the congregation's unique DNA and the nuances of the community's context from inside the organization.

Joseph L. Bower, a professor at Harvard Business School, argues, "The candidate most likely to succeed in the CEO post is a person who is both inside and outside the company: the Inside Outsider."<sup>21</sup> His thesis is that the most successful CEO transitions happen when the new CEO was developed within the organization. That is, when she owes much of her professional development to the company. Through her years of service, the Inside Outsider develops a deep knowledge of how the business works. However, her training also teaches her to think critically about the organization so that she has the dual capacity to love the organization as an insider and spot its flaws like an outsider. The Inside Outsider both knows the organization's foundational stories and has the wisdom to voice dissent when those stories become unhelpful mythologies.<sup>22</sup>

Bower's description of how leaders can develop an Inside Outsider perspective could be applied to a church internship program. He writes,

First and most important, great leaders need to have mastered their business. Mastery grows out of prolonged exposure to a single business across a variety of assignments. For most talented individuals, this eventually involves the transition from specialist-doer to generalist-manager. Their view must be holistic, cumulative, and longitudinal. They must bring that understanding to bear on all kinds of novel and baffling challenges.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Joseph L. Bower, *The CEO Within: Why Inside Outsiders Are the Key to Succession* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2007), 15.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

Internships are prime vehicles for familiarizing people with different aspects of a single organization. They walk people through the “variety of assignments” that long-term insiders naturally experience.

One clear theme that emerges from Bower’s description of Inside Outsider development is the sheer amount of time it takes to cultivate this type of leader. Prolonged exposure must be measured in years, not months. Cumulative experience must be acquired over time, and real understanding is gained incrementally. An internship program ensures the church has a head start in developing a pool of people growing in the Inside Outsider perspective. When the time for transition comes, the church has already started training viable candidates.

Leaders fulfilling the role of king are best positioned to develop an internship program for two reasons. First, funding an internship program requires wise financial management. Second, the goal of the program is to shore up the foundations of the institution so that the church may enjoy a long and healthy life, and institution-building is at the heart of what royal leaders give their attention to. They ensure what must be there “for us to be us” is secured for the future.

### ***Deploying the Prophet***

While leaders serving in the capacity of king tend to the financial and candidate-sourcing aspects of the transition, the prophetic leader is deployed to accomplish different tasks. In Freeman’s framework, the question “Where should we be?” guides the prophet’s

work, and the prophet embodies the character trait of imagination.<sup>24</sup> Within the context of pastoral leadership transitions, the prophetic leader uses their faithful and creative imagination to answer the question, “Where should we be regarding mission and organization?”

Ironically, determining where a church should be regarding mission first requires serious attention to where it is regarding its organization. A mismatch between a church’s organizational structure and its mission undermines its ability to reach future goals.

Churches must make a clear-eyed evaluation of what size they would need to be in order to accomplish their objectives. Consequently, understanding the current systems of a church must precede imagination for the future. A church can only evaluate what it wants in the future—and determine how to get there—if it has a full and realistic understanding of its starting point. Pastor and frequent retreat speaker, Pat Goodman once said, “You cannot simply want what you want. You must want what your wants lead to.”<sup>25</sup>

Accomplishing a particular missional goal requires acceptance of the systems and structure necessary to attain that goal.

Because some objectives are size dependent, organizational awareness necessarily begins with an analysis of a church’s size dynamics. Church consultant and congregational researcher Susan Beaumont argues that a church’s size greatly influences its function and its ability to pursue missional callings. She offers four size categories and outlines the growth challenges, including pastoral, staff team, board, and assimilation

---

<sup>24</sup> Freeman, “Christian Leadership.”

<sup>25</sup> Pat Goodman, speech at Williamsburg Community Chapel Men’s Retreat, Roslyn Retreat Center, Richmond, VA, 2010.

challenges, associated with each. Beaumont’s analysis is a valuable resource for churches to benchmark against.<sup>26</sup> Each of these growth challenges references a system in the church. Furthermore, Beaumont asserts that a congregation will have greater capacity for mission when it aligns its size with its systems for doing church. She writes,

Congregations are living, breathing organisms. They grow, change, and evolve under our feet as we walk. Even the most insightful and well-intentioned congregations rarely operate with perfectly aligned leadership structures. However, the congregation that actively tends to the rightsizing of its leadership systems generally finds that it has more energy to devote to mission, discipleship, and service.<sup>27</sup>

Beaumont’s insight is particularly apt for churches moving through times of transition. “Rightsizing” a church’s systems—that is, aligning a congregation’s size with its stated goals—is difficult work, and congregations are notoriously resistant to change. During a transition, when something has already changed or is about to change, there is an opportunity for a wise prophetic leader to help the congregation evaluate whether its current systems are aligned with its future visions for mission. Therefore, the leader serving as prophet, deployed to imagine where a church should be, must also help the church work through some of the organizational questions related to its size dynamics and understanding of where things stand right now. Honesty about leadership systems in the present moment helps facilitate movement toward the final prophetic destination.

It should be noted that Freeman associates the “Where are we?” question with the priest rather than the prophet. However, this view truncates the role of prophets in ancient

---

<sup>26</sup> Susan Beaumont, *Inside the Large Congregation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 67-69. See Appendix D for a chart summarizing her research.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

Israel and plays into modern stereotypes of prophets as predictors of the future. In the Bible, prophets saw visions of the future (think Ezekiel 37 and the vision of the future restoration of the dry bones, for example), but they also envisioned the present more clearly than their fellow Yahwists (as in Isaiah 1 and his call for God's people to live more justly). Likewise, the prophet in the pastoral transition process must help the congregation see both their current state and their future calling more clearly. By having its designated prophet ask both, "Where are we organizationally?" and "Where should we be missionally?" a church frees up its designated priest to ask different kinds of "Where are we?" questions. Being freed from thinking about organizational behavior enables the priest to evaluate questions related to the congregation's relationships and leadership culture, ensuring that caring for the congregation through a difficult time and helping the congregation understand its culture and goals each receive equal focus.

To help the congregation see the present more clearly before envisioning the future, the prophet should lead the congregation in questioning, what size is our church? Are our church's culture and mission aligned with our size? Will our current systems help us or hinder us from moving to where we should be? If the leader serving as prophet discovers dissonance in the church's answers to these questions, she must help the church confront the mismatch between missional aspirations and organizational size in a productive way. What does this look like in practice? How might a congregation on the edge of one size category wrestle with the implications of growth into another category?

The first size category Beaumont describes is "The Multi Cell Church." Churches arrive at this size category when they reach 250 to 400 in worship attendance and have an

operating budget between \$500,000 and \$1,000,000.<sup>28</sup> Though Beaumont's research focuses on large congregations, she notes this is not yet a large church. She starts with this size to illustrate the decisions congregations face when they reach size junctures. Reaching the size of the Multi Cell Church can be a painful intersection because it is the first size category where a purely relational approach to ministry and church life fails.<sup>29</sup> When there are 250 to 400 people attending worship, it is no longer possible to know everyone at the church personally. The answer to the "Where are we?" question for this size category is this: we are at a place where we can no longer know everyone who worships at our church. If the prophet discerns that where a congregation should be involves growth beyond 400 regular attendees, then the congregation must decide if it is willing to accept that knowing everyone in the church will become impossible. If the congregation does not want to adapt their church life to allow for systematized relationships rather than organic ones, the possible answers to the question "Where should we be?" begin to narrow.

If a congregation is open to growth, it must consider a new set of questions: What aspects of God's mission could we accomplish by growing? Who is God calling us to engage? Which characteristics of our church must we protect as we grow? And, finally, are we willing and able to adapt our systems, ministry style, relational connections, and even the type of leaders we seek to embrace new growth? Beaumont writes,

Decisions about whether the church wants to get any larger have to be carefully examined. Growth will stagnate if the congregation does not come to terms with

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 49-50.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 50.

its identity as a complex congregation where everyone doesn't know everyone else and not everyone is cared for by the pastors.<sup>30</sup>

The prophet deployed to consider a church's vision for its future is doomed to fail if she does not also consider the church's current organizational culture. The decisions the Multi Cell Church must make regarding growth are illustrative of the kinds of critical decisions all four of Beaumont's size categories require. Regardless of its size dynamic at the time of a pastoral transition, a church should deploy its prophet to help it come to grips with not only where it wants to go, but if it is willing to make the organizational adjustments required to get there.

A prophetic leader can recommend a vision of the future to the congregation, but in the end, congregants must come to terms with how they want to live together. A vision for the future that requires systematic changes to the organizational culture cannot be forced on a church without causing simmering resentment likely to outlast the leader who initiated it. Beaumont speaks to this issue when she writes, "The decision to grow larger has to be resolved with the full congregation; it is not a decision that the board or staff team can make on behalf of the congregation."<sup>31</sup> The need for congregational agency, while critical, is likely to frustrate people gifted to play the prophetic role. Yes, prophets see the present clearly, but they are typically dissatisfied with current methods and results. They long for a future that more faithfully reflects God's will for human flourishing in their congregation and community. The tension between honoring current

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



congregational perspectives and challenging the church to move toward a new future leads us to the final role that must be deployed in the transition process: the priest.

### *Deploying the Priest*

While the king tends to the financial and candidate-sourcing aspects of the transition and the prophet handles the organizational and missional elements, the priest cares for the congregation as they walk through a disorienting season. Guided by the question, “Where are we?” and embodying the character trait of vulnerability, the priest assesses, “Where are we relationally and what is required to maintain healthy congregational relationships?”<sup>32</sup> Whatever the answer to that question is, it is the work of the priest to address it with concrete acts of pastoral care, transparent communication, and congregational conversation.

One practical suggestion to enhance the priest’s work is to shift from offering strictly informational updates to providing opportunities for conversation. During the transition period at WCC, the chair of the pastoral search committee went to great lengths to communicate the work of the committee to the congregation. He offered glimpses into their meetings. He talked about next steps. He provided updated timelines when things changed. But no matter how much the board or the committee communicated, people wanted more. The search committee chair and the board consistently interpreted congregational questions as a desire for more frequent, more detailed communication.

---

<sup>32</sup> Freeman, “Christian Leadership.”

That was a royal response to a priestly need. The king works to establish order in chaotic moments, and increased communication contributes to this goal.

Many of the congregation's questions, however, reflected people's struggle to deal with their feelings about the transition. The congregation needed a priest's relational, vulnerable approach, not a king's institutional approach. Information can help people manage their expectations, but conversations help people process their emotions. Bill Harmon, a bishop in the Lutheran Church, advises pastors to run one-hour meetings, but to use only ten minutes of that hour to share information with the congregation. Congregants get the other fifty minutes to share their thoughts, questions, and emotions.<sup>33</sup> To better address the issues that emerged after the 2013 transition at WCC, the church changed the name of its quarterly congregational meetings from "Chapel Family Update" to "Chapel Family Conversation." The leadership hoped the new name would better represent its commitment to sharing information and tending to relationships. By attending to the relational life of the community in ways like this, leaders serving in the role of priest ensure the church remains a foretaste of God's Kingdom, the realm where all relationships flourish.<sup>34</sup>

The relational work of the priest requires both complete honesty and an unbreakable commitment to the community. The priest cannot simply tell everyone what they want to hear; she must conduct difficult conversations. The vulnerability required of the priest aids in her ability to have tough conversations gracefully and lovingly. The

---

<sup>33</sup> Bill Harmon, personal conversation with the author, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Freeman, "Christian Leadership."

priest embodies the role in a way that the community never questions whether she can face hard truths about the congregation and still believe the church is beautiful. Business professor and management consultant Jim Collins captured the dual role of the priest perfectly when he said, “Confront the brutal facts, yet never lose faith.”<sup>35</sup>

### ***Step-by-Step Instructions vs. Deployed Roles in the Consortium***

There was no discernible step-by-step process used across the variety of pastoral transitions in the Hampton Roads Consortium. Over ten years and through seven senior leadership changes, each church approached their situation differently. Some churches used formal search committees, while the board guided the process in others. Sometimes the previous pastor remained employed by the church. In other instances, the pastor left not only the staff team but the state. In one case, the succeeded pastor joined the governing board. Three churches used paid search consultants while all the others took on the task without outside assistance. One church’s constitution required the board to unanimously approve a candidate before presenting that person to the congregation. Other boards worked knowing consensus was their goal. One church took as long as seven years to make their transition, while others took only months. When thinking in terms of Wright’s step-by-step process approach to pastoral transition, the Consortium churches shared just one step. After wildly diverse paths through pastoral transition, each church’s process culminated in a congregational vote.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don’t* (London: Random House Business, 2001), 65.

<sup>36</sup> Bunn, Esperat, Hardesty, LoPresti, Rush, Spitz, and Williams interviews.

What the churches did have in common was someone, or some group, who played the roles of prophet, priest and king. While not traditionally considered a step in the transition process, deploying these roles contributed to each Consortium church reporting a successful transition. At VBCC, the succeeded pastor, Rich Hardison, acted in the kingly role. He waited patiently for his successor, Robb Esperat, to sense a calling to become the next senior pastor. Hardison desired to serve as a transitional pastor, who would quickly step aside as soon as the church identified the next generation of leadership. However, he stayed nine years to ensure the church enjoyed a healthy transition to its next pastor. Recalling Hardison’s role in the process, Esperat said, “He was exceedingly patient with me.”<sup>37</sup> When asked why Hardison stuck with him for so long, Esperat responded, “He lives and breathes for the health of the church ... that made him stick it out.”<sup>38</sup> In addition, Hardison pulled together the financial resources and allotted additional time off so Esperat could attend seminary. Esperat was filled with gratitude for the opportunity, especially when he considered the circumstances. “These were lean years, so Rich and one of our elders advocated within their circles to fund it.”<sup>39</sup> This kind of preparatory work is the hallmark of the royal role.

Rich Hardison was not alone in his work to transition the church well. A former senior pastor aided the process by acting as a prophet in Esperat’s life. Esperat longed for a role in international missions. He started on the church staff as the interim worship leader, and he believed this job would become a bridge to a position on the mission field.

---

<sup>37</sup> Esperat interview.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

When asked what was the most difficult aspect of your transition, Esperat responded, “I did not want to do it. The plaque on my door was interim worship leader. Halfway through the first year, someone changed it to worship leader. I cried weekly because God seemed to be changing the trajectory of my life.”<sup>40</sup>

A conversation over lunch with a longtime overseas missionary, Morrie Cottle, changed Esperat’s perspective. After serving internationally, Cottle became senior pastor of VBCC, Esperat’s church. He knew both roles quite well. Cottle recounted a story to Esperat about the time his daughter had a medical emergency while his family was ministering in a remote village. He told Esperat, “My daughter was dying and there was no way to evacuate her. We had a mule and a cart. As we rounded a mountain I thought, this is my fault.”<sup>41</sup> His conviction that being a foreign missionary was his calling from God provided the only solace he experienced in that difficult moment. Cottle leveled Esperat with a directive: “If God is calling you here, don’t you dare go there.”<sup>42</sup> Cottle’s prophetic leadership helped Esperat see the difference between where he wanted to be and where he *should* be.

Within the Consortium’s many transitions, the transition that took place at Tab was particularly painful. The church was in decline, and the succeeded pastor tried to solve that problem by giving the church property away without congregational input. Bills piled higher while trust sank lower. The successor pastor, Craig Rush, reported, “We had a handful of people who seemed afraid to let go of their power and influence.

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

There was territorialism ... Rather than having the humility to ask God what was going on, they doubled down on what they were already doing. It almost cost the church its existence.”<sup>43</sup> When asked what helped the congregation get through such a difficult transition, Rush responded, “Pastor Ed and his commitment to prayer.” Rush responded not with a step on a plan, but with a person who played the priestly role. Ed Haywood served as the interim pastor before Rush’s arrival. I had the opportunity to provide pulpit fill on multiple occasions for Pastor Haywood during the transition. I was moved to see that instead of praying quietly in his office, or with a handful of staff members, Haywood moved the pre-service prayer gathering into the sanctuary. He invited anyone who was a part of the Tab family to join. There was a palpable sense that God was using Pastor Haywood to comfort people in a season of disorientation.

Haywood remained on the staff team after the transition. He now leads the senior adult ministry, the group in any church most likely to need priestly leadership. The seniors carry a lot of hurt from all that transpired necessitating leadership change. Haywood chose to lead them in a study on forgiveness.<sup>44</sup> This is precisely the type of relational and restorative work priestly leaders are deployed to do.

No step-by-step process could anticipate the variety of circumstances in which the Consortium church transitions occurred. However, deploying the three anointed leadership roles of the Old Testament—the prophet, priest, and king—which are embodied and fulfilled by Jesus Christ, allows any church in any circumstance to address

---

<sup>43</sup> Rush interview.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

their situation with distinctly contextualized and customized leadership. Deploying these roles points congregations toward the kind of Christocentric leadership they should seek in their next pastor. If a church intends to find someone who leads like Jesus, they should search for that person by deploying the roles of Jesus.

### ***Even Moses Could Not Fulfill All Three Roles***

While Moses engaged in many of the institution-building tasks of the royal role, he was never anointed as a king. The Mosaic tradition of the Torah looks forward to a time when Israel has a king, or royal leader, that is not Moses. The role of the king is outlined in Deuteronomy 17:14-20. In that passage, Moses himself affirms the role of a future king. “When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, ‘I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,’ you may indeed set over you a king whom the LORD your God will choose.”<sup>45</sup> Even Moses could not fulfill every leadership role God’s people needed. Moses needed the aid of a priest, his father-in-law Jethro, to accurately assess the quality of Israel’s life together in the wilderness. Jethro looked at the quarreling Israelites and Moses’s approach to settling relational disputes and declared, “What you are doing is not good.”<sup>46</sup> In the end, God called Moses’s brother, Aaron, to serve as the priest for Israel. Moses was not anointed as a priest. Rather, he was the one whom God asked to anoint Aaron.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Deuteronomy 17:14-15a (NRSV).

<sup>46</sup> Exodus 18:17 (NRSV).

<sup>47</sup> Exodus 29:7.

Moses is most clearly identified with prophetic leadership. Deuteronomy 34:10 claims, “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face.”<sup>48</sup> Moses’s life was characterized by calling God’s people to, and leading them toward, the Promised Land. His job was to determine where the Israelites *should* be and lead them there. His leadership guided Israelites to understand the kind of lives they should live and the type of community they should build. While this was a monumental task, and he is surely remembered as a long-suffering, powerful, and effective leader, God did not ask Moses to fulfill all three anointed offices for Israel. If Moses himself could not fulfill all three roles, no one person, in any church, will have the capacity or calling to fulfill all the roles required for a pastoral transition. Instead, a group of people with diverse perspectives and gifts should be deployed as prophets, priests, and kings to lead the church like Jesus toward their next Christlike pastor.

### ***My Name is Brooks Wilson***

My pastorate at WCC began in deeply uncertain times. The previous pastor had served for twenty-nine years. After a series of difficult events in his personal life, his behavior became erratic. The board offered him six weeks off to rest and heal. Four weeks later, however, the board announced the issues were more complicated than they had anticipated. They extended his leave of absence to twelve weeks. After ten weeks, the board told the congregation the pastor would not return. It was a shocking moment for the church.

---

<sup>48</sup> Deuteronomy 34:10 (NRSV).



As mentioned in the introduction, WCC's congregation grew significantly under the pastor's leadership. He was the only pastor many congregants ever knew. The board asked me to serve as the interim senior pastor. I leaned heavily into the kingly role as I led the church through transition. I focused on order-making, largely neglecting the priestly caregiving and emotional processing the congregation needed. I spent little to no time acting as prophet by discerning the direction we should move in after the crisis passed. I was consumed with triaging the array of issues that fell into my lap upon the previous pastor's departure. At the congregational meeting when the church voted to drop the interim title and install me as the next senior pastor, a single comment forced me to reevaluate the approach I had been taking for months.

Following the meeting, a line of people waited to shake my hand. Most people said encouraging and hopeful things about the next chapter of the church's life. One man, however, bucked the trend. He stared at me, then said sternly, "I think I'm okay with this, but my name is Brooks Wilson and I'm going to need you to remember that." I did not have the language then to fully understand what he meant, nor did I have the capacity to change my leadership approach until I reflected more deeply on the three-fold office of Jesus. Now, however, I realize he was calling me to pay more attention to the priestly role I had neglected during the transition process.

Pastoral transitions can feel like a great contradiction. They are times of both possibility and peril. Imagine how my transition process could have been shaped differently if, amid that moment, I had deployed the unique gifts and capacities of other church members, and together we had represented the fullness of the three-fold office of Christ. Likely, someone would already have known Brooks Wilson's name.

### ***Bryant Wright's Biggest Error***

In addition to offering a step-by-step plan, derived solely from his own church's context, and attempting to export it as a "Lego build" for other contexts, Bryant Wright makes another glaring error. A well-intentioned error, but an error nevertheless. I feel justified in calling it glaring since the error is in the subtitle of the book, *Preparing Your Ministry for the Next Leader*. It is Wright's "your" which is problematic.

As an interim pastor, I had to learn a critical lesson quickly to survive the transition process: Jesus is the True Pastor of the Church. During our transition, there were constant questions about what I was going to do with "Bill's church." People would comment, "It must be difficult to lead Bill's church without Bill," and ask questions like, "Do you think Bill's church is going to survive this whole ordeal?" In those difficult moments, God granted me an insight that became one of the core values of our church over the next decade. Namely, Jesus is the True Pastor of the Church. Jesus says to the Apostle Peter, "I will build *my* church."<sup>49</sup> The church is not Peter's, Bill's, Bryant Wright's, or mine. The church belongs to Jesus. He is the one who filled the covenant roles and simultaneously transformed them. As a prophet, he not only spoke the word of God, but he was the "Word made flesh."<sup>50</sup> As a priest, he offered the ultimate sacrifice, himself. As a king, he reigns not through the sword but through the cross.<sup>51</sup> Empowering multiple leaders who together embody the three-fold office of Christ will create effective

---

<sup>49</sup> Matthew 16:18 (NRSV). Italics added.

<sup>50</sup> John 1:14 (NRSV).

<sup>51</sup> Freeman, "Christian Leadership."

transition plans and offer congregations a foretaste of the kind of pastoral leadership worth searching for. When Moses is dead, deploy a prophet, priest, and king.

## Chapter 4

### Speak with Candor

#### *An Unlikely Meeting*

“He will never have time for an appointment with me,” I said to my assistant shortly after Easter in 2013. A month earlier, I had been appointed interim lead pastor of WCC, and I was trying to determine how to close the gap between the task at hand and my limited knowledge of how to do the job. The gap was vast. Truthfully, I had no idea what I was doing. Because interim roles are temporary by definition, boards often neglect to craft clear job descriptions. I was confused about what my new role entailed, and asked myself repeatedly, “What does an interim pastor *do*?”

There was one well-known person in my town with experience as an interim leader, and I desperately wanted to talk to him. The problem, however, was that he was the president of a university, and I was sure university presidents did not offer free consulting to local pastors.

My desire to pursue this unlikely meeting was rooted in the recent history of my alma mater, The College of William and Mary. In February 2008, the president, Gene Nichol, resigned. He had served just three years at the tradition-rich school founded in 1693. By the time of his resignation, Nichol was embroiled in too many controversies to continue leading. The rumor that his was the shortest tenure for a William and Mary president since the Civil War moved through the ranks of alumni. When he left, people on all sides of the many debates that ensnared Nichol were frustrated and angry. Anyone with a connection to the school had strong opinions about what happened, and there was

no clear path to healing. I worried the school that had shaped my adult life would never recover.

Just hours after Nichol's resignation, William and Mary's board appointed W. Taylor Reveley III as interim president. He was the dean of the Law School and had been a runner up in the previous presidential search. He inherited a mess. After about six months of Reveley's leadership, however, William and Mary felt like a renewed version of its old self. The school extricated itself from polarizing national news coverage. The Faculty Assembly withdrew their threats for a variety of no confidence votes. Students stopped protesting and returned to class. Alumni giving stabilized and began to grow. Ultimately, the board dropped the interim title, and President Reveley served William and Mary until 2018.

Again, I said to my assistant, "He will never have time for an appointment with me, but he is the person in this town most likely to know something about interim leadership. Please give his office a call." I was grateful—and more than a little shocked—when I got the news that I was on President Reveley's calendar the following week. By the time I walked into his wood-paneled office, I had distilled my thoughts down to three questions: What does an interim leader do? How did you calm things down so fast? And, how did you know you wanted to be the president beyond the interim role?

Reveley's answers to these questions shaped my leadership approach during my eighteen-month tenure as interim pastor. But it was his answer to the second question that I believe has broad relevance to pastoral transitions in a variety of church settings. When asked, "How did you calm things down so fast?" Reveley responded unhurriedly, in his inimitable Virginia accent, "I spoke with candor."

Reveley detailed how he met with every constituent group. He listened to every concern each group voiced until the room ran out of steam. Then, he told me, “I spoke to all of their concerns with candor.” When he asked me what had happened at my church, I shared the difficult story. In response, Reveley leaned back, looked me right in the eyes, and said, “I think it's time for some candor.”

### ***Messy and Unexpected Transitions***

Pastoral transitions often contain elements of pain for the congregation, the pastor, the board, the local community, or some combination of the four. William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird write, “While some successions are seamless, too many others are birthed out of messy and unexpected circumstances ... At Vanderbloemen [their pastoral search firm], situations like this comprise about 1 out of 4 cases that come to us.”<sup>1</sup> A full quarter of succession-planning efforts, then, require heavy revision at the time of transition because the circumstances under which leadership crafted their plans have changed. New, often more complex, issues must be addressed, and the strategies leaders thought would move the church effectively through its transition must be revised.

Messy and unexpected transitions increase the likelihood of congregational trauma so much that a new conference was created in the Chicago metropolitan area specifically to help people affected by two particularly difficult transitions in that region. As Religion News Service reported, “Now in its third year, Restore was founded by Christian investigative journalist, Julie Roys, in the aftermath of major scandals at two

---

<sup>1</sup> Vanderbloemen and Bird, *Next*, 184-185.

Chicago-area churches—Willow Creek Community Church and Harvest Bible Chapel.”<sup>2</sup>

In my own experience pastoring a church through a painful transition, I continue to receive calls more than a decade after the events transpired from people who are still working through issues of relational hurt.

Vanderbloemen and Bird define “messy and unexpected” like this: “When succession follows adultery, nasty church splits, or other such challenges.”<sup>3</sup> Whatever “other such challenges” a congregation faces, the strategy churches should deploy when a transition is forced, untimely, painful, or traumatic is to speak with candor.

### ***When a Church Fails to Speak with Candor***

It is easy to say “speak with candor,” but it can be exceedingly difficult to do so. Bill Hybels’s departure from Willow Creek Community Church, mentioned in the introduction, is a cautionary tale of what happens when a church fails to speak with candor. The difference between the public’s perception of the church prior to Hybels’s departure and its perception after his resignation is hard to overstate. Before 2018, when Hybels resigned, a national survey of the best Christian places to work regularly praised Willow Creek’s staff culture.<sup>4</sup> In a 2005 cover story, the influential publication *Christianity Today* lauded Hybels as part of the vanguard of evangelicalism making the

---

<sup>2</sup> RNS Press Release Distribution, “Hundreds to Gather at ‘Restore 2023’ for Insight and Healing from Church Hurt,” *Religion News Service*, September 18, 2023, <https://religionnews.com/2023/09/18/hundreds-to-gather-at-restore-2023-for-insight-and-healing-from-church-hurt/>.

<sup>3</sup> Vanderbloemen and Bird, *Next*, 184.

<sup>4</sup> “Our Story,” *Best Christian Workplaces*, last modified 2024, <https://workplaces.org/our-story>.

biblical case for a multicultural church.<sup>5</sup> Now, the first article someone encounters when googling Hybels's name is an exposé by the *New York Times* entitled, "He's a Superstar Pastor. She Worked for Him and Says He Groped Her Repeatedly."<sup>6</sup> The distance between a healthy Christian workplace, a multicultural church model for others to emulate, and the headline in the *Times* is vast. Willow Creek found itself in the midst of a messy and unexpected transition.

Far from responding with candor, Hybels used euphemistic language to describe his departure. He said, "I have decided to accelerate my planned retirement."<sup>7</sup> While Hybels was scheduled to retire approximately seven months later, departing his position in the face of a meticulously researched article by a respected publication alleging sexual harassment and adultery should have been called what it was—a resignation. Other church leaders continued on the trajectory Hybels set, also declining to speak with candor. Hybels's successor, Heather Larson, for example, told the Willow Creek congregation, "This is not the end of the story. It's not the end of Bill's story. It's not the end of Willow's story, and it's certainly not the end of God's story."<sup>8</sup> Her statement, while technically true, could apply to any number of situations. The leadership failed to

---

<sup>5</sup> Curtis Paul DeYoung et al., "Why All Churches Should Be Multi Racial," *Christianity Today*, April 1 2005, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/april/22.33.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Laurie Goodstein, "He's a Superstar Pastor. She Worked for Him and Says He Groped Her Repeatedly," *The New York Times*, August 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/05/us/bill-hybels-willow-creek-pat-baranowski.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Karen Allen, "Mega Church Pastor Steps Down Amidst Misconduct Allegations," *ABC News*, April 11, 2018, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/pastor-church-attended-25000-steps-amid-misconduct-allegations>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



address the root cause of his resignation. Instead, they chose to keep things vague, making statements that were neither forthcoming nor candid.

There is evidence that Willow Creek’s failure to address the situation candidly further damaged the church and traumatized Hybels’s victims. Writer Laura Barringer tells the story of how, even three years after Hybels infamously “accelerated his retirement,” the church still would not—or did not know how to—speak clearly about what had happened. She writes, “Willow Creek held a core meeting for members on May 26, where new senior pastor Dave Dummitt and new South Barrington campus pastor Shawn Williams fielded questions from those in attendance. Among others, this question was asked: ‘Why is Bill Hybels’s name rarely mentioned?’” Congregational leaders often fear that speaking candidly could present congregants with information too difficult for them to handle. In reality, Willow Creek’s lack of candor did not ease congregants’ worries. Instead, it intensified concern. Candor answers existing questions; lack of candor creates new ones.

In her examination of how church leadership responded to the question of why no one would discuss Hybels, Barringer first states that because the response references the experiences of abused men and women within the congregation, “The answer to that question is sacred. It is delicate. It can shatter or it can contribute to a redemptive process.”<sup>9</sup> She then prays for the church and the victims. Finally, she offers candor, and her candor, when contrasted with the church’s response, is stark:

---

<sup>9</sup> Laura Barringer, “Willow Creek’s Core Meeting: A Response,” *Christianity Today*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2021/june/willow-creeks-core-meeting-response.html>.

I was instantly alarmed by the tone and the applause and joking and fist-bumping and laughter over who should answer the question: “Why is Bill Hybels’s name rarely mentioned?” I was alarmed by appeals to being “the new guy” as an excuse for not knowing how to respond. Abuse was labeled a “polarizing reality of people’s perspectives.” Shawn Williams said he talked to people “who can’t understand why Bill was treated the way he was treated.” I was alarmed that an answer to a question so delicate and sacred would be treated with cavalier attitudes and back-slapping and no mention of the victims [and without] concern for their deep, enduring wounds.<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, Dummitt and Williams spoke of Hybels as they responded to congregants’ concerns, but only to describe him as a “once-in-a-generation leader.”<sup>11</sup> Even after being afforded three years to seek wisdom concerning what to say and how to say it, the church’s inability to speak with candor was still generating anger, re-traumatizing victims, and inhibiting the church’s new leadership from being agents of healing and restorers of mission.

### ***The Bible’s Guide to Candor***

Willow Creek’s leaders will not be the last who must decide whether to speak vaguely or with forthright candor in the face of congregational trauma. In her address at Virginia Theological Seminary on the subject of trauma, Rev. Dr. Judy Fentress-Williams defined trauma as, “The wound which will not heal.”<sup>12</sup> In my pastoral work, I have observed that no one moves through life without experiencing trauma. We all have wounds which will not heal. Based on Vanderbloemen and Bird’s experience, no church

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Judy Fentress-Williams, “Preaching Jeremiah” (lecture, Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, VA, December 3, 2017), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16CRPMJ-ER0>.

with four or more pastoral transitions moves through its lifespan without a traumatic pastoral transition. Eventually, then, every church—and every person within it—is cut deeply enough that the pain stubbornly refuses to subside.

As people and church communities search for ways to dress their wounds, they often turn to the Bible for wisdom regarding life and faith’s most complicated matters. They seek an answer to the question King Zedekiah asked the prophet Jeremiah: “Is there any word from the LORD?”<sup>13</sup> At this crucial moment, Christians look to their church leaders in order to hear Jeremiah’s answer: “There is.”<sup>14</sup>

This chapter aims to demonstrate the importance of speaking with candor when addressing leadership transitions, particularly those that arise unexpectedly or take place under troubling circumstances. Furthermore, it seeks to equip church leaders with a biblical resource—the book of Lamentations—to understand *how* to speak to their congregations with candor. Lamentations was written in response to a national catastrophe. The community’s worst fears came to pass in the destruction of their capital city, the deportation of their leaders, economic deprivation, and the theological crisis that followed. Biblical scholar Linda Day asserts, “The Book of Lamentations is the most tragic in the Bible.”<sup>15</sup> Lamentations’ transparency regarding tragedy makes it a helpful tool beyond the church boardroom. It has the capacity to assist congregants, even those

---

<sup>13</sup> Jeremiah 37:17 (NRSV).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Joel B. Green, ed., *The CEB Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Common English Bible, 2018), 1301 OT.

with the most difficult experiences, work through painful, traumatic leadership transitions with candor regarding their own thoughts and feelings.

Old Testament scholar Brent A. Strawn affirms Lamentations' candid approach to difficult matters. He writes, "What Lamentations offers is nothing less than a complex and complicated engagement with suffering and its several causes. Israel's suffering, personified and given voice as destroyed Zion, is recounted in stomach-turning detail."<sup>16</sup> Strawn's words are a warning to readers as they approach Lamentations: scripture is about to get candid. With its provocative opening word, intricate acrostic structure, variety of perspectives, and multivalent setting, Lamentations offers the Bible's candid word to communities and people coping with trauma. Church leaders dealing with distressing transitions should use Lamentations both as a model for candid communication about difficult issues in the life of their congregations and to help individuals process their experiences.

### ***The Purpose of Lamentations***

Prior to the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament (LXX), editors derived a biblical book's title from its first word or first significant phrase.<sup>17</sup> Lamentations begins with the thought-provoking Hebrew word *eka*, most frequently translated as "How?" The importance of this word for understanding Lamentations cannot be overstated. Strawn explains its weightiness, writing, "The opening verse—even the very first word—signals

---

<sup>16</sup> Brent A. Strawn, *Honest to God Preaching: Talking Sin, Suffering, and Violence* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021), 77.

<sup>17</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 327.

how much is at stake, how much has been lost.”<sup>18</sup> The word *eka* grabs readers’ attention and pushes them to engage with the painful themes that follow by encouraging them to ask their own questions about suffering. How did we get here? How did this happen? How will we ever recover? Taking stock of the many answers to these questions is a crucial task for church leaders following a complicated or acrimonious pastoral transition.

How should we understand the “how” that begins Lamentations? How do we understand *eka*? Perhaps it is the cry of a traumatized person. Kathleen M. O’Connor suggests something along these lines when she argues that *eka* is an “exclamation of shock” that “should, perhaps be pronounced with a catch in the voice or with a gasp.”<sup>19</sup> Understanding the opening word in this way indicates that a person can be so traumatized that they are unable to articulate what has happened. Their ability to process what happened is limited precisely *because* of what happened. The Common English Bible translation of Lamentations 1:1 affirms O’Connor’s exegesis, translating *eka* as “Oh, no!”<sup>20</sup> We can imagine a friend stumbling over those words or sobbing as the words leave their mouth. A sufferer might plausibly continue, “Oh, no! I am devastated. How do I even begin to express what happened?” In this interpretation, what follows in Lamentations offers people the vocabulary with which to express their trauma before God.

---

<sup>18</sup> Strawn, *Honest to God*, 77.

<sup>19</sup> Kathleen O’Connor, “The Book of Lamentations: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreters Bible Volume 6*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 1023.

<sup>20</sup> Lamentations 1:1 (CEB).

Having the words to give voice to difficult-to-express experiences is important, but O'Connor's interpretation does not give enough consideration to the highly structured poetry that follows the word *eka*. Yes, there are exclamations of absolute anguish in Lamentations: "My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out to the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city."<sup>21</sup> However, these cries are framed and bounded by deliberately structured poetry. Each chapter contains a poem with twenty-two lines, or some multiple of twenty-two lines. Pain is expressed, but it is not unbounded. The boundaries Lamentations offers readers as they cry "Oh, no!" demonstrates that giving voice to pain is only one piece of Lamentations' larger purpose.

Taking into consideration the deliberate literary structure that follows, *eka* serves as the starting point on a map intended to help a person find their way through their pain. Naomi Seidman's work points in this direction. She writes, "Behind the declarative *how* of the title lurks an interrogative 'how' that questions the means and even the possibility of telling about this unspeakable catastrophe."<sup>22</sup> In Seidman's view, the original title of the book, *Eka*, is connected to its larger purpose. Rather than being an unrestrained cry of grief, *eka* is the means by which we process our suffering. Being faithful to the language of the text itself, the larger purpose of Lamentations is connected to the question, "How do we process trauma?" Beginning with *eka* and moving through the structured poems that follow, Lamentations teaches people how to ask, "How?"

---

<sup>21</sup> Lamentations 2:11 (NRSV).

<sup>22</sup> Naomi Seidman as cited in O'Connor, "Lamentations," 1023.

In the midst of complex pastoral transitions, people need to express their frustration, grief, and pain. However, wise church leaders must also find ways to shepherd people productively through their initial “exclamations of shock” and back toward the mission of the church. This was God’s purpose when God said to Joshua first, “Moses is dead,” and then, “Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites.”<sup>23</sup> God attempted to move Joshua from grief to mission.

Like Seidman, biblical scholar Jean-Marc Droin supports a purpose larger than the exclamation of grief in the opening line of Lamentations. He argues, “In the literal rendering of the title, ‘How,’... [we find] a close approximation to the book’s meaning ... Lamentations is a quest for understanding in disaster more than simply a sorrowful lament.”<sup>24</sup> The quest for understanding is a universal human longing, and that longing intensifies in times of crisis. Lamentations provides a resource for leaders to help people satisfy this need. Still, the question remains, *how* does Lamentations teach readers to process their pain in a productive way?

### ***How to Ask Eka? Acrostic Poetry***

The book of Lamentations is organized in a striking pattern. As noted earlier, each chapter contains twenty-two verses, or a multiple of twenty-two verses. There are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and each chapter is connected to this linguistic fact in

---

<sup>23</sup> Joshua 1:2 (NRSV).

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Marc Droin as cited in O’Connor, “Lamentations,” 1024.

some way. The most dominant literary feature of Lamentations is its imaginative use of acrostic poetry. In acrostic poems, the first letters of poetic lines create patterns that contribute to the overall meaning of the work. Lamentations uses the abecedary acrostic form, also called an alphabetic acrostic, masterfully. Each of the poetic lines begin with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.<sup>25</sup> The form itself assists the reader in the critical task of asking, “How?”

The book of Lamentations deploys alphabetic acrostics throughout its chapters. Chapter one contains twenty-two verses with three lines each, beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter two is similar to the first. Chapter three is a triple acrostic. Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is used to begin three lines of poetry for a total of sixty-six verses in the chapter. Chapter four returns to the pattern of chapters one and two, yet with only two lines per verse. Finally, chapter five surprises readers by abandoning the acrostic structure, yet intriguingly, it still offers a twenty-two-line poem.

That the use of the acrostic form is so pronounced, and the variations on the device so clearly intentional, suggests that the meaning of Lamentations must be connected to the form(s) of the acrostic pattern(s) that comprise its chapters. The carefully crafted exception to the rule in chapter five also shapes proper interpretation of the text. As scholar and commentator Tremper Longman III contends, “Meaning follows form.”<sup>26</sup> So, what meaning do these forms intend to convey? There are at least three

---

<sup>25</sup> Longman, *Lamentations*, 334-335.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.



exegetically defensible ways Lamentations' acrostic poems teach people to ask, "Eka?" Lamentations instructs us to question "How?" completely, collectively, and carefully. Examining pain in this way will assist church leaders to speak with candor in the midst of painful transitions.

### ***Completely, Collectively, and Carefully***

The claim that Lamentations helps readers process *eka* completely is grounded in the meaning of the Bible's most well-known acrostic, Psalm 119. Psalm 119 is the longest psalm, as well as the longest chapter in the Bible, and its length contributes to its meaning. Psalm 119 examines the Torah meticulously, and it uses an expansive vocabulary to do so. Reading Psalm 119 offers the sense of an overwhelmingly thorough review of the Torah. The methodical march through the alphabet in the acrostic poetry of Psalm 119 symbolically moves the reader from the beginning of a topic to the end. The author intends for readers to feel that there is nothing left to say. The depths have been searched, the end reached, the subject examined completely.

Applying this logic to the acrostics of the book of Lamentations suggests the author aims to describe the staggering breadth of suffering. Lamentations reveals the suffering of God's people completely and thoroughly. Nothing is left unmentioned or unconsidered, and the suffering is explored *aleph* to *taw*. On one level, the alphabetic acrostics magnify pain. On another level, however, Lamentations helps readers see an end to the suffering of God's people. The corollary truth is that Lamentations also helps the reader reach the end of their own pain. This alphabetic acrostic always ends at *taw*. Our suffering is not interminable.

Speaking with candor during pastoral transition means that a congregation should be given the opportunity to explore the wide range of factors, issues, and behaviors that led to a pastor's departure. Additionally, they must be reminded frequently that the season of transition will come to an end. The pain will not last forever.

In addition to aiding people in treating a topic completely, the acrostic structure also lends itself to memorization of texts so that they can be used collectively by the community. O'Connor writes, "Acrostics may have been used for aesthetic purposes, to show off the poet's skill, or as an aid to memory."<sup>27</sup> In modern Jewish tradition, Lamentations is read publicly on the ninth of *Av*, a day set aside in the Jewish calendar to remember tragedy and consider the place of suffering in the journey of the faithful.<sup>28</sup> In the oral culture in which Lamentations first emerged, the acrostic pattern would have helped communities recite the poem together. Now, speaking with candor about pastoral transitions means bringing a congregation together at critical junctures to allow the community to process their experience collectively. The wise church leader, however, will include elements of worship to ensure that the collective processing of the transition does not devolve into self-pity. This type of communal recitation in worship is how Lamentations may have been used in ancient Israel since the memorability of the

---

<sup>27</sup> O'Connor, "Lamentations," 1018.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible vol. 3: The Writings* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2019), 669.

acrostics meant they were especially suited for liturgical use.<sup>29</sup> Collective participation in worship can fill a community with hope for the future, rooted in God's care in the past.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, the acrostic structure helps the reader process trauma carefully by facilitating a slow, methodical pace through the text. Readers are called to move slowly and carefully from one letter to the next until they reach the end of a well-crafted path through their experience. For O'Connor, it is not only the acrostics of Lamentations that aid in a careful examination of a reader's experience, but the variety of literary devices deployed by the author. She writes, "The book's literary puzzles, its mixtures of forms, voices, and unevenly shaped poems may give evidence of deliberate crafting, a chiseling and polishing of words, images, and poetic forms that draw readers into a maelstrom and force them to find their own way out."<sup>31</sup> The moment a messy or unexpected transition is announced, the congregation is placed inside a maze with no easy way out. Lamentations tasks readers with finding their way through the maze deliberately, small step by small step.

Careful readers will bump into an unexpected obstacle as they work through the maze of Lamentations' acrostics. The order of the Hebrew alphabet, established in chapter one, changes slightly in chapters two through four. In chapter one, *ayin* is the sixteenth letter of the alphabet followed by *pe*, the seventeenth letter. In chapters two through four, this order is reversed. While some scholars argue the variation is the result of pre-exilic versus post exilic versions of the Hebrew alphabet, it is possible the author is

---

<sup>29</sup> O'Connor, "Lamentations," 1018.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 1017.

subtly warning against an over reliance on the effectiveness of the acrostic form.<sup>32</sup> The same pattern does not work for everyone. Gimmicks will not get you through the maze. Everyone must work carefully through the nuanced contours of their grief.

Lamentations is a guide through the maze for both individuals and institutions. Speaking with candor about pastoral transitions includes the careful processing of the personal and institutional factors that led to the messy transition. These are complicated moments for all parties involved. People are carrying the additional weight of emotions, hurt, memories, or in particularly fraught situations, guilt, for not doing more to help before the situation went off the rails. Therefore, careful processing also includes the great care exercised by leaders as they facilitate these conversations. A truly careful congregational leader will consider bringing in outside professional help to ensure appropriate care is offered to all involved in the transition process.

As mentioned earlier, chapter five intriguingly abandons the acrostic device while nevertheless retaining the familiar twenty-two-line structure. This illustrates two possible outcomes for the careful processor of suffering. Perhaps the acrostic structure failed to contain the grief of the reader. Their sorrow is now out in the open, their soul flooded with emotion too deep to process. It spilled over the banks of what the form could hold. A second possibility seems more likely. The reader, assisted by the acrostic form, has experienced some degree of healing. They no longer need the formal assistance of the acrostic pattern to process their experience. However, the reshaping of their lives was so

---

<sup>32</sup> See additional notes in Longman, *Lamentations*, 378. The different abecedarium used in Lamentations were first pointed out to me in a personal conversation with Old Testament scholar Brent A. Strawn, December, 2023.

influenced by the acrostics that they continue to use an element of the form to guide them into the next phase of their recovery.

### ***Additional Features of Lamentations***

There are two additional exegetical observations about Lamentations that will assist congregational leaders in speaking with candor during pastoral transitions: the variety of perspectives and the multivalent setting. Lamentations examines suffering through at least three discernible voices.<sup>33</sup> In chapter one, the city is personified as a maiden.<sup>34</sup> In chapter three, we meet “the man who has seen affliction.”<sup>35</sup> And, throughout the book, the story is told by a narrator who moves masterfully between third-person, second-person, and first-person perspective. The perspective shifts often at pivotal moments in the acrostic pattern (the center and the end). This demonstrates that the author desires to make a point by making these changes. Perhaps the variety of voices in Lamentations indicates that no single perspective is sufficient to process grief completely, collectively, and carefully. Instead, multiple perspectives must be considered, and everyone within the community, those who experienced the trauma directly and others who only observed their pain, must be given a voice.

Evaluating candor as a strategy for healthy pastoral transitions through the lens of Lamentations’ consideration of many perspectives shows us that leaders should

---

<sup>33</sup> There are likely additional voices in the text, but the purpose of this section is to point out the presence of multiple perspectives in the book of Lamentations not to identify all of them.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1048 OT.

<sup>35</sup> Lamentations 3:1 (RSV).

encourage a variety of voices in their congregation to speak candidly. Church leaders must both communicate with candor and facilitate appropriate outlets for others to do the same. Rather than attempting to control the narrative, as too many leaders are prone to do, it is the task of leaders to help others find their voice in the midst of the transition process.

A final exegetical observation has to do with Lamentations' original context. It is widely held that Lamentations is a poetic reflection on the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians in 587 BC, and the LXX affirms this.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, Longman points out that some contemporary interpreters, namely Iain Provan, Adele Berlin and Erhard Gerstenberger, claim "that the language of the book does not definitively place the book in the exilic period."<sup>37</sup> He continues, "Nowhere are the destroyers of the city named ... and Jerusalem was destroyed more than once between the 6th and 2d centuries B.C. (We have only to think of the damage done by the Seleucids in the middle of the 2d century B.C.)."<sup>38</sup> Longman maintains that the evidence suggests Lamentations refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon, but he nevertheless affirms the spirit of the aforementioned interpreters' proposal. He writes, "Gerstenberger is absolutely right that Lamentations is not a historical report, but rather a liturgical text that could be used for any number of catastrophes or for all of them."<sup>39</sup> The setting of Lamentations should

---

<sup>36</sup> Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 643. See also Septuagint introduction to Lamentations in Longman, *Lamentations*, 328: "And it came to pass after Israel had gone into captivity, and Jerusalem was laid waste, that Jeremiah sat weeping and composed this lament over Jerusalem and said..."

<sup>37</sup> Longman, *Lamentations*, 329.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

consequently be seen as variable. Similarly to how the author chose to vary both the voices speaking and the perspective of the narrator, Lamentations avoids making the historical circumstances too obvious. The text has the potential to help sufferers in any setting, at any time.

Church leaders often believe their situation is too unique to plan for.<sup>40</sup> When it comes to heart-wrenching transitions, then, leaders may feel like their situation is too unique for others to understand. They may believe that since no one has gone through something like this before, they must be exceedingly cautious when speaking about what has happened in order to avoid further damage. The varied setting of Lamentations should assure church leaders that God's people have experienced multiple disasters in the past. Scripture offers us God-inspired, time-tested, and candid words to make sense of the present mess in our congregation.

An exegetical analysis of Lamentations reveals just how helpful the book can be to communities in crisis. From the provocative opening word and the meaning of biblical acrostic poetry, to its variety of perspectives and its flexible setting, the book of Lamentations teaches church leaders and congregants how to navigate from *eka* to healing when they face complex and painful pastoral transitions. When the circumstances of a pastor's departure surprise the congregation or are traumatic, leaders must address Zedekiah's question, "Is there any word from the LORD," and give Jeremiah's answer, "There is." That answer can be found in the book of Lamentations. Using the book as a model, church leaders who desire to speak with candor as a strategy for navigating

---

<sup>40</sup> Vanderbloemen and Bird, *Next*, 31.

complex transitions smoothly should communicate why the transition happened and how the church will move forward. They must also provide a space where congregants can begin to formulate their response to their own *eka* moment.

### ***Candor and the Consortium***

In my interviews with all seven Consortium churches, candor emerged as an oft-repeated theme. Each pastor commented on the importance of good communication in the pastoral transitions their churches experienced in the past ten years. It was most pronounced, however, in the transition at CCC. Their leadership successfully used the strategy of speaking with candor throughout their transition process.

I posed these questions to Dan Hardesty, one of the co-successor pastors at CCC: Do you consider your transition successful? If so, what made it successful? And if not, what could have made it more successful? In response, Hardesty answered, “I consider the transition highly successful. The church remained healthy. There was harmony, unity, and people did not leave. There were no hiccups in the discipleship of the church.”<sup>41</sup>

In explaining the transition’s success, Hardesty gave credit to the succeeded pastor’s humility, then dug into highlighting their church’s “congregational preparedness.”<sup>42</sup> When asked to explain what prepared the congregation for the transition, he answered, “There was lots of communication which was done with both frequency and detail.”<sup>43</sup> Specifically, there was honest communication that set healthy

---

<sup>41</sup> Hardesty interview.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.



expectations for the congregation regarding the future. He told the congregation directly, “I am not Scott [Scott Hill, the succeeded pastor].”<sup>44</sup> As Hardesty explained it, Hill had a different set of gifts than him. He was a particularly merciful pastor who excelled at pastoral care. “Mercy just moved to Florida,” Hardesty stated bluntly.<sup>45</sup> At CCC, they combined honest communication with frequent and detailed communication. They spoke with candor.

Centerpoint’s leadership was thoughtful about *how* they would communicate in addition to being thoughtful about *what* they would communicate. Hardesty described their plan to ensure all stakeholders received communication and the intentional order in which each group heard news about the transition. Church leadership always started by communicating with the formal membership of the church. Then, they moved to what they called the “leadership summit.” These were people who held a leadership role in the church. The leadership summit included small group leaders, children’s ministry volunteers, members of the missions committee, and other people who held influential roles in the congregation. After speaking with these two groups, which allowed church leadership to get valuable feedback and subsequently refine their message, they would share information with the congregation.<sup>46</sup> Leadership consultants often call this style of communication a “cascade.” It starts with one group of people and gradually flows to every constituent group. Centerpoint applied the technique in textbook fashion, which surely required tactical planning and disciplined execution.

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

In addition, they committed to allotting significant time to questions and answers at every in-person meeting. They let go of the need to control the narrative, allowing anyone to ask anything. Like President Reveley at William and Mary, they listened to every constituent group until the room ran out of steam. Chris Williams, the co-successor pastor at CCC, stated, “We allowed the congregation to say their fears and concerns out loud.”<sup>47</sup> As we learned from Lamentations, in difficult moments, leaders are not the only people called to speak candidly. The leadership at CCC created space for the entire community to speak with candor. When asked if the transition was successful, Williams answered emphatically, “Resounding yes!”<sup>48</sup>

The one caution about candid communication that emerged during my interviews regarded the timing of communicating about future transitions. The successor pastor at PCC, Garret Spitz, needed to complete his seminary studies in time to take the helm. The succeeded pastor, Tom Kenny, knew this would require a significant investment of time and money. The church’s leadership decided the congregation needed to understand the resources about to be released to Spitz. They thought it was reasonable to assume people would ask why the church was making such a significant investment in one particular staff member. Leadership wanted to have a ready answer. However well-intentioned this was in theory, in practice it forced the board to announce the intended transition from Kenny’s leadership to Spitz’s a full seven years before it took place. While the timing of the communication for this particular congregation may have been necessary, Spitz

---

<sup>47</sup> Williams interview.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

stated, “There was tension because we communicated so early, people began champing at the bit for the transition. Without the seminary issue, maybe five years would have been a sweeter spot.”<sup>49</sup>

Candor added complexity to this transition and arguably made it more difficult. Still, it is not known what issues would have surfaced had church leadership decided not to say anything. Had the leadership opted to wait to communicate their intentions for Spitz, members may have been silently frustrated with Spitz being given extra time off and additional resources to attend seminary. Then, when it came out that this was part of a larger succession plan, the board could have been flooded with questions from the congregation about why they were not told. There may even have been broken trust. Some decisions are straightforward and with hindsight can be judged as right or wrong. However, other decisions are more complex, and they require certain tensions to be managed rather than resolved. It is likely that the timing of the announcement of Spitz as the potential successor contained tensions to manage rather than decisions to get right or wrong.

Even as the early announcement caused some in the congregation to suffer from transition fatigue, when asked what helped the congregation through the process, Spitz responded, “Communication was the biggest thing.” The church’s communication resulted in “an orderly transition.”<sup>50</sup> In the end, while difficult choices had to be made

---

<sup>49</sup> Spitz interview.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

around when and how to communicate, speaking with candor played a positive role in the pastoral transitions in the Hampton Roads Consortium.

### *Moses Gets Candid*

Candid speech also played a significant role in the leadership transition from Moses to Joshua. Before Moses died, he spoke with candor to wake Israel up to the dangers they would face on the other side of this change in leadership. The contrasting themes of his final and penultimate words to the community reveal the possibilities for healing that open up when leaders commit to first speak with candor.

Deuteronomy presents Moses's final words as a blessing for Israel. Within the text, his final role is encourager of God's people. He describes Benjamin, stating "The beloved of the LORD, rests in safety—the High God surrounds him all day long—the beloved rests between his shoulders." Of Gad, Moses states, "Blessed be the enlargement of Gad." And of Asher, Moses says this: "Most blessed of sons be Asher; may he be the favorite of his brothers, and may he dip his foot in oil. Your bars are iron and bronze; and as your days, so is your strength."<sup>51</sup> These words are gracious, but they are preceded by a lengthy section of judgment.

While Moses's final words blessed, his penultimate words warned. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, commenting on this section of Deuteronomy, often referred to as "The Song of Moses," calls the poem a "prophetic lawsuit."<sup>52</sup> Its theology,

---

<sup>51</sup> Deuteronomy 33:12 (NRSV); Deuteronomy 33:20a (NRSV); and, Deuteronomy 33:24-25 (NRSV).

<sup>52</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 277.

themes, and rhetoric are closely aligned with pre-exilic prophets who warned Israel of impending judgment in the form of spiritual and military disaster. Brueggemann contends, “Moses’ utterance is cast as a judicial case concerning broken covenant.”<sup>53</sup>

Before the blessing comes the candor. Moses says:

Jacob ate his fill; Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked. You grew fat, bloated, and gorged! He abandoned God who made him, and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation. They made him jealous with strange gods, with abhorrent things they provoked him. They sacrificed to demons, not God, to deities they had never known, to new ones recently arrived, whom your ancestors had not feared. You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.<sup>54</sup>

Brueggemann titles his comments on this section, “Massive Judgement, Surprising Hope.”<sup>55</sup> Candor about our present situation is the foundation on which hope for the future is built. Church leaders who refuse to speak with candor for fear of the consequences fail to create the conditions for the very things they hope will happen.

Moses’s speech aligns with the pattern of Lamentations. The acrostic poems helped move readers through their grief completely, collectively, and carefully. In Deuteronomy, Moses is quite transparent in his assessment of Israel’s future, sharing his concerns about Israel with complete honesty. He offers his prophetic speech to the collective “whole assembly of Israel.”<sup>56</sup> And, at the end of the song, we learn that Moses is not singing alone. Joshua, his successor, joins his voice with Moses and speaks— or in

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Deuteronomy 32:15-18 (NRSV).

<sup>55</sup> Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 277.

<sup>56</sup> Deuteronomy 31:30b (NRSV).

this case sings—with candor.<sup>57</sup> Finally, he is careful to say all that needs to be said: “Then Moses recited the words of this song, to the very end.”<sup>58</sup> By speaking with candor, even about painful things, Moses offers a map out of Israel’s future maze of suffering. He models the honesty required to move through their eventual moment of troublesome transition.

Many church leaders consider the cost of speaking with candor too high. They believe that the risk of offending someone or stepping out of bounds when it comes to employment law is too great. Church leaders often fear that the truth could lead to diminished congregational trust. They worry it may curb congregants’ belief that a brighter future for the community lies ahead. However, any attempt to speak less than candidly must wrestle with the fact that God is the author behind Moses’s candid song lyrics. “The LORD said to Moses ... write this song, and teach it to the Israelites.”<sup>59</sup> While Moses is the author of the final blessing, God is the author of the penultimate warning. God chose to speak with candor.

In addition, the ending to the Song of Moses reveals that leaders’ concerns that hard truths may snuff out hope are unfounded. Deuteronomy records the last stanza of the Song of Moses like this: “Praise, O heavens, his people, worship him, all you gods! For he will avenge the blood of his children, and take vengeance on his adversaries; he will

---

<sup>57</sup> Deuteronomy 32:44 (NRSV)

<sup>58</sup> Deuteronomy 31:30a (NRSV). The same theme of *complete* speech is repeated two more times at the end of The Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32:44-45 (NRSV): “Moses came and recited all the words of this song in the hearing of the people, he and Joshua son of Nun. When Moses had finished reciting all these words to all Israel ...”

<sup>59</sup> Deuteronomy 31:16, 19 (NRSV).

repay those who hate him, and cleanse the land for his people.”<sup>60</sup> Sharing difficult truths does not eliminate the possibility of hope. Rather, on the other side of bruising judgment is hope for the future.<sup>61</sup>

It should be stated as emphatically as possible: candor is not condemnation. As we see in the example of Moses’s final and penultimate words, honesty about what went wrong creates the right conditions for healing and points people to a future when God will make things right.

### ***Thirty Years Later***

Inspired by my time with President Reveley, I asked the board to consider hosting an event where people could share their emotions, frustrations, and concerns during WCC’s time of transition. Within a few weeks, the entire board sat on the platform of one of our worship spaces listening to the congregation—and even some community members—pour out their souls. I learned a great deal that night. I learned what many people thought about our pastor’s departure. I learned that people were conflicted about the board’s role in the process. I learned our church body was deeply wounded. I learned our board needed to say more than they had in their previous statements. And, unfortunately, I learned that the non-disclosure agreement the board had signed was an obstacle to speaking with candor. Even without the legal ability to address people’s comments, however, our church’s leadership demonstrated a deep humility in their

---

<sup>60</sup> Deuteronomy 32:43 (NRSV).

<sup>61</sup> Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 282.

willingness to listen to everything anyone wanted to share with them. In the end, some candor was better than no candor.

There was one moment, however, that still concerns me. One man responded to a developing theme in people's comments about the need to move on from our current controversy. He said, "Thirty years ago, I was part of a church that dismissed its senior pastor due to a pattern of unrepentant moral failure. Thirty years later, I, along with many others from that church, have yet to move on." The man's comments stuck with me because they were repeated by other congregants over the next year. Long-time friends of the pastor I succeeded seemed resigned to the same fate as the man who spoke. They would seek me out to tell me, "I will never get over this. Did you not hear what was said at the meeting? People from *that* church are still dealing with their feelings thirty years later."

There was a kernel of truth in what the man said, of course. Attempts to move forward too quickly tend to leave major issues unaddressed. But two unspoken assumptions in his comments continue to trouble me. First, he assumed that if some people had not processed their pain, it was likely no one else had moved through their pain either. Second, he implied that if one community of God's people never found a resource to help them move through their pain, then such a resource must not exist. While some people do get stuck in the midst of their trauma, others find their way through and discover new insights about themselves, the world, and God. Joseph is a well-known biblical example. He faced great suffering after being sold into slavery, but he eventually told his brothers, the very people that were the source of his painful circumstances, "And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God



sent me before you to preserve life.”<sup>62</sup> While the resources people like Joseph use to gain their new perspective are often undiscussed or undiscovered, that does not mean they do not exist.

While addressing the topic of difficult transitions, Weese and Crabtree write, “Have the departing pastor and new pastor lead a transitional worship service together that emphasizes the universal qualities of the church’s life and acknowledges loss, pain, and new possibilities at the same time.”<sup>63</sup> While this is good advice, they fail to share any stories of church members who have done the hard work of processing their pain and loss. They do not offer a model for how people move through messy transitions to new possibilities for their church. And, most troubling of all, they do not recommend any resources that could assist church leaders in this crucial task. A second recommendation they offer is to, “Develop a set of rituals, devotional materials, and transitional activities, based on the best research available, that can tend to the needs of people relating to loss, grief, and closure.”<sup>64</sup> Again, this is important work, but without providing examples, models, or resources for how communities actually work through grief and seek closure, the task is often too daunting for people to know where to begin. Sadly, the result is comments like the one I reported from our congregational meeting: “Thirty years later, I, along with many others from that church, have yet to move on.”

### ***The Resource Hidden in Plain Sight***

---

<sup>62</sup> Genesis 45:5 (NRSV).

<sup>63</sup> Weese and Crabtree, *Elephant in the Boardroom*, 109.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

A board member once told me that just as a body that has recently undergone surgery cannot run a marathon, the body of Christ cannot sprint forward following the loss of a long-tenured and beloved senior pastor. This is true for a time. Lamentations, however, is the canon's call to do the hard work of processing pain so that, when the time does come to move forward, the church is ready. Just as Lamentations' acrostic poems help readers reach the end of their suffering, it can help churches reach toward the end of their need to continue churning over painful events. The book of Lamentations is one of God's gifts to help move people and communities through periods of traumatic transition into what God has next for them. In the plethora of sad articles I have read about painful pastoral transitions, I have yet to find one that mentioned Lamentations as a potential tool to help congregations heal. Pastors and church leaders have neglected this resource for far too long. The book they need is inside the book they open in worship services every week. When Moses is dead, the grief may feel overwhelming, but church leaders can open the gift of Lamentations to process grief completely, collectively, and carefully, and to model for them how—when Moses is dead—to speak with candor.

## Chapter 5

### Drop the Baton and Seek Interdependence

#### *Studying Success*

Over a ten-year period, from 2013 to 2023, all seven churches in the Hampton Roads Consortium experienced leadership transitions from one pastor to another, and all seven successor pastors reported that those transitions were successful. Weese and Crabtree state that a successful pastoral transition “enables a church to move forward into the next phase of its external and internal development with a new leader appropriate to those developmental tasks, and with a minimum of spiritual, programmatic, material, and people losses during the transition.”<sup>1</sup> This description of healthy changes in leadership matches the testimony of the successor pastors. The churches did not waver from their core missions: discipleship continued uninterrupted; outreach to the community expanded; and budgets and church attendance remained stable or even grew. By all accounts, these were positive outcomes, but how were they accomplished? What did the Consortium churches do that allowed for such success?

The discipline of practical theology examines how beliefs about God, sacred texts, and ethics are applied in religious practices and community life. By analyzing interviews conducted with the successor pastors of the Hampton Roads Consortium through the lens of practical theology, this chapter examines the practices involved in their success. While the previous chapter sought to help churches when things go wrong, this chapter explores two strategies that help ensure things go right. The decade of

---

<sup>1</sup> Weese and Crabtree, *Elephant*, 41.

successful pastoral leadership changes within the Hampton Roads Consortium reveals that when Moses is dead, churches should drop the baton and seek interdependence.

Leadership transition literature is replete with baton-passing imagery.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, pastor and author Tom Mullins does a deep dive into the metaphor in his book, *Passing the Leadership Baton: A Winning Transition Plan for Your Ministry*. Within the book, he cites *New York Times* reporter Sam Borden's research on the dominance of the United States' men's and women's Olympic relay teams: "Since 1932, American women have won as many Olympic gold medals in the 4×100 relay (nine) as all other countries combined. Since 1920, the American men's relay team has won gold at 15 of the 21 Olympics held."<sup>3</sup> Many factors contributed to the gold medal performances of Team USA, but Mullins focuses on one: the baton pass. As Mullins explains it, Borden's research states,

A fluid exchange can make the difference between a successful race and disappointment. On a good pass, the baton spends about 1.8 seconds in the zone ... A bad pass might have the baton there for 2.0 seconds ... Poor passing can cost a team half a second or more—an eternity in a sport where finishes are often decided by hundredths of a second.<sup>4</sup>

For Mullins, this is an empirical data point that should convince readers the baton pass is where most races are won or lost.

---

<sup>2</sup> For an example from the study of executive succession in business, see Richard F. Vancil, *Passing the Baton: Managing the Process of CEO Succession* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1988). For an example related to church ministry, see Rowland Forman, Jeff Jones, and Bruce Miller, *The Leadership Baton: Intentional Strategy for Developing Leaders in Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Sam Borden, "For U.S. Relay, Dread of Another Dropped Baton," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/23/sports/olympics/olympics-2012-us-track-relays-hope-to-avoid-another-baton-drop.html>, as cited in Tom Mullins, *Passing the Leadership Baton: A Winning Transition Plan for Your Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Nevertheless, in the exchange zone, the space where runners must pass the baton, a lot can go wrong. First, runners may not pass the baton quickly enough. Or, runners may focus too much on speed, which can lead to disqualification. Teams are disqualified if their runners do not stay in their own lanes, and too much focus on the quick movement of their hands can cause runners to lose track of their feet. The slightest misstep means the end of the race. Too much focus on the placement of their feet, however, can cause runners to make the gravest of all relay race mistakes: dropping the baton.<sup>5</sup>

Mullins retells the story of a dropped baton by both the US men's and women's teams in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, dramatically highlighting the “tinging” sound of the baton reverberating through the arena. “Everything was over in an instant, and every commentator said the same thing: the race is won and lost in the exchange zone.”<sup>6</sup> Here, Mullins pivots, applying the concept of the exchange zone to leadership transitions in churches. “Churches also have an exchange zone,” he argues. “A good pass of the baton of leadership is as crucial to any organization as it is in track and field relays.”<sup>7</sup> The metaphor appears clear enough, and it is used so frequently—“don't drop the baton”—that it is often treated as self-evident.

Mullins states unequivocally, “Everyone needs to be thinking about this passing of the baton.”<sup>8</sup> Yet despite Mullins's confidence that leadership transitions are successful or unsuccessful just like a baton is either handed off or dropped, his metaphor starts to

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

break down with the first example he cites: the transition from Robert H. Schuller to his son Robert A. Schuller at the Crystal Cathedral in Orange County, California.

Robert H. built a well-known television ministry in an iconic glass church. After twenty-six years as its senior pastor, he tapped his son to be the next leader.<sup>9</sup> Robert A. spent decades apprenticing under his father and learning his style of ministry.

Nevertheless, as Mullins explains,

In just a few short years the board dismissed all Schuller family members from leadership positions on staff and on the board. They tried to rebound from all the problems that came from the transition, but unfortunately, nothing helped. The Crystal Cathedral finally had to file for bankruptcy. The reputation of one of the best-known megachurches in America had sadly been reduced to inter-familial squabbles, mounds of debt, and For Sale signs.

How could this exceedingly close father and son have dropped the baton? Perhaps because the dropped baton was not the issue. Rather, the expectation that the baton could be passed, or more importantly, *should* be passed, was the problem. Mullins argues that the transition failed because, “Robert H. couldn’t embrace the *changes* that his son was proposing.”<sup>10</sup> Batons do not change. Batons *cannot* change. In that, churches are quite unlike batons because churches are not static objects that can be handed from one person to another.

The New Testament uses three primary images for the church, likening it to a body, a bride, and a family.<sup>11</sup> Two of these three descriptions are relational. Relationships involve a complex range of emotions and compromises, and they evolve over time.

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> See 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 for the church as a body, Ephesians 5:31-32 for the church as a bride, and 1 Timothy 3:15 for the church as a family.

Relationships are not simply passed around, remaining wholly intact with each hand off. The Greek word *ekklesia*, often translated in English as “church,” means “a called out gathering.” A church, then, is a group of people called by God out of their communities to gather, then called by God out of the gathering and back into their communities. Gatherings grow and shrink and gain or lose momentum. Gatherings can be focused or just for fun. But, in every case, a gathering is a unique expression of the moment, and it cannot be precisely reproduced nor handed from one person to another.

The reason people often feel like batons are dropped during a leadership transition is because they *are* dropped. They are impossible to pass, and, in fact, they need to be dropped for the transition to succeed. The next strategy for pastoral transition, then, is to drop the baton. The goal is not to avoid dropping the baton, as Mullins argues. Rather, leaders should be intentional about dropping it. They must prepare the congregation for the moment the baton hits the ground, and its sound reverberates through the sanctuary.

### ***Dropping the Baton in the Consortium***

Eastside Church is a church plant of WCC. Doug Bunn, the pastor of Eastside, knew from the beginning that the planted church needed to run differently than the planting church due to its location and target group for outreach. The idea for the new church came when Bunn was an associate pastor at WCC. In that role, he oversaw the church’s Agape ministry, which helped people with immediate and emergency financial needs. He noticed many of the ministry’s clients lived on the east side of town. This section of Williamsburg sits just across from the pristinely kept restored historic area, literally located on the other side of the railroad tracks. Despite its proximity to the high-

end hotels of a tourist destination for affluent history buffs, the Eastside community has all of the socioeconomic conditions associated with the colloquialism “the other side of the tracks.” Bunn’s experience leading the Agape ministry prompted him to move to the east side of Williamsburg and begin a practice of prayer-walking the neighborhood to build relationships.

Eventually, Bunn’s private efforts connected with WCC’s desire to expand its community outreach. WCC’s leadership decided to plant a church on the east side of town to provide better ministry with and among people unable to travel to the planting church. When the church approached Bunn about becoming the pastor, he replied, “Previous experience told me not to do it unless the leadership [was] 100 percent behind it.”<sup>12</sup> His biggest concern was unanimous leadership support because, he explained, “I knew the ministry model would be considerably different from the planting church. Without full support, I knew some might push for more congruence with the methods of the [Williamsburg Community] Chapel.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, he was concerned people expected a baton pass.

When asked what the most difficult aspect of the transition was, Bunn responded, “the culture of the Chapel.” He was referring to both spoken and unspoken expectations that the planted church would arrange its ministries to work in a similar fashion as those of the planting church. He continued, “There were some in the leadership of the Chapel that hung on too tightly even after Eastside was planted. They wanted to see certain

---

<sup>12</sup> Doug Bunn, interview by author on Zoom, June 23, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



things happen. To me, those things felt like they could change the whole vibe of Eastside.”<sup>14</sup> While Bunn saw the need for a new type of ministry that fit the culture of Eastside and its surrounding neighborhood, some of WCC’s leaders expected to hand off something similar to the Chapel and plant it in a new location. The expectation of a baton pass, then, persisted even into Bunn’s successful tenure as the pastor of the new church.

Bunn understood that some expected him to pass the baton of the planting church’s approach to ministry, but instead he intentionally dropped it. When asked what made his transition successful, Bunn responded, “The church started with missional small groups, and no one had any preconceived notions about how I should run the groups.”<sup>15</sup> Those involved in the first small groups dropped the baton of their previous small group experience at WCC, opening themselves to the new possibilities for ministry that Eastside presented.

Bunn’s success depended upon his willingness to resist baton-passing expectations. His resistance created a culture that anticipated—and welcomed—baton dropping by its first congregational leaders. This approach contributed to a successful transition to Bunn as the first pastor of Eastside and created the environment out of which ministry for a more socio-economically diverse part of Williamsburg flowed.

Similarly, the moment Garrett Spitz, successor pastor of PCC, dropped the baton was the moment he sensed the transition would ultimately succeed. During the early portions of the COVID-19 pandemic, a board member emailed both Spitz and Tom

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Kenny, the soon to be succeeded pastor, to gain clarity on the church’s approach to ministry in that particularly difficult moment. Spitz, believing he was in charge of the response, replied to the email. Kenny, thinking that he should make the call because he was still the lead pastor, also answered the board member’s question. Their emails were sent so closely together that neither realized the other had already responded. When Spitz saw that his answer conflicted with Kenny’s approach, he panicked and immediately began composing a new email. His furious writing, however, was interrupted when Kenny arrived in his doorway. Instead of rebuking him, as Spitz expected, Kenny graciously encouraged his leadership and said, “You lead the response.”<sup>16</sup> What could have been construed by Kenny as a to-be-avoided baton drop—the new pastor taking things in a different, and therefore inferior, direction—was instead described by Spitz as the sign that Kenny had transitioned to Spitz’s leadership in his own heart.

In interviews, Spitz offered evidence that PCC allowed him to drop the baton when he referenced Kenny’s openness to change: “He led with an open hand. He did not develop a cult of personality. He shared the pulpit.”<sup>17</sup> You cannot grip a baton too tightly when your hand is open.

Spitz also reported that he and Kenny spoke openly about their differences. Even knowing that Spitz did not share his views on every topic, Kenny encouraged Spitz to make changes before the formal transition took place. Spitz was clearly moved by Kenny’s support even as Spitz changed aspects of church life and ministry. His most

---

<sup>16</sup> Spitz interview.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

definitive statement of gratitude for Kenny’s approach came when he was asked what made their transition successful. Spitz answered clearly and succinctly, “My predecessor.”<sup>18</sup> A succeeded pastor who allowed for, and at times encouraged, dropped batons created the conditions for a successful transition.

The baton dropping continued at CCC. Dan Hardesty, one of the co-successor pastors, reported changes in three key areas of church life—the spiritual gifts of the pastor, the model of the pastorate, and the name of the church—that aided rather than undermined a successful leadership transition. Hardesty described the succeeded pastor’s departure from the church as, “Mercy just moved to Florida.”<sup>19</sup> In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul tells the church that though they are all part of the same body, they are gifted spiritually in different ways. Among the gifts listed is mercy, and, Paul writes, “The one showing mercy should be cheerful.”<sup>20</sup> Congregations that have become accustomed to their pastor’s unique gifts often expect that every pastor will share those gifts. Hardesty anticipated that reality and prepared the congregation for a dropped baton in the area of the spiritual gifts of the pastor. He said, “We were honest about the fact that we were not Scott [Scott Hill, the succeeded pastor]. Scott is a mercy guy. He scores high on the empathy scale. That is not me and Chris [Chris Williams, the co-successor pastor].”<sup>21</sup> Sharing openly that the “mercy baton” was about to get dropped calibrated congregational expectations for their new pastors.

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Hardesty interview.

<sup>20</sup> Romans 12:8 (CEB).

<sup>21</sup> Hardesty interview.

The second baton Hardesty and Williams dropped was the solo senior pastor model. Instead, their pastorate would be rooted in shared leadership, which they called the co-lead pastor model.<sup>22</sup> When asked how they implemented this change, Hardesty responded, “The previous pastor suggested it.”<sup>23</sup> The process unfolded organically rather than strategically, which would have been impossible had the leaders involved treated the concept of solo senior pastoral leadership as a baton to be passed: “We simply had two people in the chute. The gift mix was right, and there was a lot of unity between the two of us.”<sup>24</sup> By being open to change, the previous pastor, Hardesty, and Williams all created space for something new to develop.

In the end, Hardesty and Williams showed remarkable humility. Neither pushed for a particular outcome on the decision of whether to stay with a solo senior pastorate or shift to a co-lead pastor model. Although a great job in a community they loved was on the line, neither of them grasped for the old model, which would have put one of them in a sought-after position, or the new model, which would have guaranteed both a role in the church. Hardesty said, “We told the board, you decide. Just let Chris and I know what you want to do.”<sup>25</sup> As it had for PCC, open-handed leadership at CCC led to dropped batons and healthy transitions.

The final dropped baton at CCC came three years into Hardesty and Williams’s tenure when they changed the name of the church. Centerpoint’s original name was

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

Community Church of Chesapeake. When another church in the area changed its name to Community Church, people often confused the two churches. Hardesty recounted a humorous story about someone who became frustrated with the Community Church of Chesapeake's receptionist when she did not know how to give them directions to Community Church.<sup>26</sup> Still, however valid the reason, changing a community's name is a heavy lift for even the strongest leaders.

Hardesty reported three factors in the successful name change: time, timing, and rationale. First, they waited three years. This was not the first decision they made as the new co-lead pastors. They also took time to form a committee to receive broad congregational input. The path to unity is often traveled slowly. Second, they executed the change at a strategic moment in the church's life, its fortieth anniversary, when the congregation was both honoring the past and imagining the future. Third, they grounded the change in the church's theological and missional identity.<sup>27</sup> For Williams and Hardesty, CCC communicates the centrality of the person of Jesus Christ for the ministry. In addition, the new name called people to think beyond Chesapeake, Virginia: "From the center point of our city we move out to people and places where he [Jesus Christ] is not known."<sup>28</sup> For the mission to be clarified and for the movement to grow, the name baton could not be passed; it needed to be dropped.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Centerpoint Community Church: 40 Years, [https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.cloversites.com/df/df82aea0-ea79-49a5-a8eb-860e2ce9185d/documents/CCC\\_40\\_year\\_history.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.cloversites.com/df/df82aea0-ea79-49a5-a8eb-860e2ce9185d/documents/CCC_40_year_history.pdf).

All three changes—the spiritual gifting of the pastors, the model of the pastorate, and the name of the church—originated with pastoral leaders who stated during their hiring process, “We communicated what would not change.”<sup>29</sup> Even with their commitment to ministry continuity, however, they dropped batons not mistakenly, but intentionally, for the good of the church. In times of transition, the dynamic nature of church leadership requires that pastors drop the baton.

### *Seeking Interdependence in the Consortium*

The second strategy that assisted the churches of the Hampton Roads Consortium in successful pastoral transitions was seeking interdependence. This thesis highlights the particular needs of independent churches. Denominationally affiliated churches have bishops, district superintendents, or presbyteries to assist in the process of pastoral transition. For those churches, this thesis may serve as an additional resource or conversation partner. For independent churches, however, who have no bishop to call or presbytery to consult, pastoral transitions are an isolating moment. Even churches that know they need help may not know where to find it.

The strengths of the independent church model include its abilities to contextualize ministry for a unique local environment, to pursue innovation at a faster pace than denominational bureaucracy allows, and to spend resources on priorities the congregation deems crucial for its mission. These positive aspects of independent church polity, however, turn into liabilities during downturns and ministry transitions.

---

<sup>29</sup> Hardesty interview.

Contextualized ministry may mean a smaller pool of candidates from which to recruit. Apart from institutional governors, hasty innovation can lead to unforeseen errors. And, too much congregational input on the expenditure of resources sometimes tempts people toward mission regression rather than expansion; nostalgic mindsets lure people to return to familiar ways of doing things. If Moses had taken a congregational vote, Israel would have gone back to Egypt.<sup>30</sup>

What Adam Wyatt, a member of the Southern Baptist Executive Committee, said about Baptist polity is also true of the independent church context: “The beauty of the SBC is that we’re local and autonomous. The challenge is, we’re local and autonomous.”<sup>31</sup> This challenge becomes greater during times of transition since, by definition, independent churches lack external stabilizing structures. During their transitions of the past ten years, the churches of the Hampton Roads Consortium addressed this challenge by seeking interdependence.

The first covenant of the Hampton Roads Consortium demonstrates that the drafting leaders were determined to hold the values of autonomy and connection in tension with one another. The initial vision was “to be more effective in our strategic alliance than we would [be] on our own,” but these pastoral leaders also desired to “partner in ways that allow us to keep our individual identity.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, they

---

<sup>30</sup> See Numbers 14:3-4 (NRSV).

<sup>31</sup> Bob Smietana, “A Southern Baptist Leader Hid Decades of Abuse. Will His Fall Doom SBC Abuse Reforms?” *Religion News Service*, January 23, 2024, [https://religionnews.com/2024/01/22/a-southern-baptist-leader-used-religion-and-piety-to-mask-decades-of-abuse-will-his-fall-doom-sbc-abuse-reforms/?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=A+Southern+Baptist+leader+hid+decades+of+abuse.+Will+his+fall+doom+SBC+abuse+reforms%3F&utm\\_campaign=ni\\_newsletter](https://religionnews.com/2024/01/22/a-southern-baptist-leader-used-religion-and-piety-to-mask-decades-of-abuse-will-his-fall-doom-sbc-abuse-reforms/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=A+Southern+Baptist+leader+hid+decades+of+abuse.+Will+his+fall+doom+SBC+abuse+reforms%3F&utm_campaign=ni_newsletter).

<sup>32</sup> Hampton Roads Consortium Covenant, May 15, 2004, Norfolk, VA. See Appendix A.

believed they would be better both together and apart. Together, they could leverage resources and help one another through the inevitable difficulties of church life. Apart, they could remain committed to their unique local contexts, experiment with new forms of ministry, and choose to join in—or abstain from—funding Consortium-wide projects.

Notably, the drafters of the first Consortium Covenant identified pastoral transition as a particularly fraught event in congregational life, writing, “Independent evangelical churches are susceptible to church splits for many reasons. One reason can be the valid dismissal of a senior pastor for moral failure, changes in philosophy of ministry ... or doctrinal reasons.”<sup>33</sup> This statement reveals concern for the messy and unexpected transitions discussed in the previous chapter. Their concern, however, was not limited to these most difficult transitions. Instead, they imply that any pastoral change has the potential to disrupt even a healthy congregation’s ministry.

The Consortium Covenant’s authors reference theologian Alister McGrath’s concern regarding the propensity of evangelical Christians to reduce church life to a cult of pastoral personality.<sup>34</sup> These leaders offered a remedy: “... encourage the Reformational idea of the priesthood of all believers.”<sup>35</sup> Congregations in which believers see themselves as having a key role in the ministry of the church, they suggest, will fare better when it comes time for a particular pastor to leave. Even given their desire for strong local congregations, they advocated for the role of the Consortium to assist even the most vital churches, writing, “The Consortium shall function as a tool to help the

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



priesthood within an individual church.”<sup>36</sup> Together, these statements suggest two things. First, church cultures in which believers see themselves as part of the ministerial team do better when it comes to pastoral transition. And second, pastors often wield such influence within their own congregations that if the time comes that a pastor needs to be held accountable, it often requires the assistance of other churches.

With these convictions in mind, the leaders of the original five independent churches in the Hampton Roads Consortium decided to seek interdependence. The initial Consortium Covenant was the vehicle that enabled these leaders to pursue their goal.<sup>37</sup>

The interdependence of the Consortium churches played a crucial role in the transition at the Tabernacle Church of Norfolk. Without the Consortium’s help, Tab would likely no longer exist. Interdependence was the life boat that allowed them to safely navigate their near-death experience.

Tab’s attendance and financial resources declined for at least a decade before things came to a head. Because members were still accustomed to the scope and reach of a large church ministry, leaders delayed the difficult decisions required to right-size their approach and budget for what had once been a vanguard church in the Tidewater region. In the midst of their decline, a newer, fast-growing church based in nearby Virginia Beach approached Tab about taking over its facility. Leaders told the congregation that giving the church away was the most viable option in light of their circumstances.

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> See Appendix A.

For years, Tab's leaders had pulled away from their relationship with the Consortium. The news that the church was in such a difficult position that its leaders were advocating for a merger with another ministry came as a shock to the rest of the Consortium pastors. Additionally, a significant portion of Tab's congregation was eager to hear if there were other options. Tab's leaders were often asked, "What about the Consortium?" and eventually, several key members forced the leadership to have a conversation regarding help available to the church from the Consortium.

Determined to stay the course, Tab's leaders pushed ahead. However, the prospect of a failed congregational vote on the merger slowed things down. Eventually, leaders asked the Consortium what help they could offer, and the Consortium stepped in with pulpit supply, organizational consulting, and the financial resources required to retain a professional search firm to conduct a national pastoral search. The assistance created enough margin for the remaining leadership and membership to imagine a future for their church.

I was one of the pastors who preached regularly at Tab during their season of transition. Along with various expressions of gratitude, people often remarked, "We forgot how much we needed the Consortium." During their years as a thriving ministry, it was tempting for Tab to place the emphasis on their identity as an independent church. Free from denominational restrictions, they had founded new ministries around Norfolk and in nearby cities and expanded their global missions footprint.<sup>38</sup> However, when decline set in, a strict commitment to independence left them on a path to extinction.

---

<sup>38</sup> Hampton Roads Consortium Covenant, November 23, 2016, Norfolk, VA. See Appendix B for a list of some of the ministries founded through the Tabernacle Church of Norfolk.

Reclaiming their interdependence with the other Consortium churches enabled Tab to enter a season of renewal.

The successor pastor at Tab, Craig Rush, confirmed the critical value of the Consortium's involvement in his transition. When asked what helped the congregation through its transition, Rush responded quickly and emphatically, "The Consortium!" before expressing certainty that the church would have closed without the help it received.<sup>39</sup> A renewed commitment to seeking interdependence created new options the previous leaders, with their focus on independence, had failed to see.

Rush reported that the Consortium's benefit went beyond the formal assistance offered during the transition. As the old leaders departed, Rush found himself in need of new staff members. He reached out to people associated with Tab's historic partnerships and the ministries born out of the church. In doing so, he found a new outreach pastor at an urban mission founded by Tab, while the new groups pastor had connections to Tab through a church-supported campus ministry at Old Dominion University. Finally, the new children's director came from RRR Ranch, a non-profit camping ministry that sits on land purchased by Tab's founding pastor.<sup>40</sup>

When asked why these people were willing to join a church staff that had recently experienced turmoil, Rush responded, "They sensed the culture of the church [had] changed."<sup>41</sup> It was clear the church had reached out for help when it needed it, and they trusted the church would do the same thing again if something went wrong while they

---

<sup>39</sup> Rush interview.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

were on staff. A sense of the newfound interdependence of the church aided Rush in recruiting high quality staff capable of stewarding the renewal effort.

Finally, Rush summarized his main take away from Tab's reengagement with the Consortium like this: "The church learned that we are independent but not alone."<sup>42</sup> When the time comes for pastoral transition, external support can be the difference between a church experiencing a new season or having to come to grips with the fact that they are in their last season. Therefore, churches should seek interdependence prior to any change in leadership.

### ***When God Instructed Moses to Drop the Baton***

Toward the end of the book of Numbers, God reminds Moses that he will not lead Israel into the Promise Land. Realizing his life is nearing its end, Moses responds by asking God to appoint his successor. He pleads with God, "Who shall go out before them and come in before them ... that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep without a shepherd."<sup>43</sup> God responds to Moses's question and request by telling him to commission Joshua and bring him to stand in front of Eleazar the priest and the congregation of Israel. Then God tells Moses, "You shall give him some of your authority, so that all the congregation of the Israelites may obey. But he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the decision of the Urim before the LORD; at his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in."<sup>44</sup> By divine direction,

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Numbers 27:17 (NRSV).

<sup>44</sup> Numbers 27:20-21 (NRSV).

then, Joshua would only receive *some* of Moses's authority; the baton would not be passed wholly intact from one leader to another.

Systematic theologian David L. Stubbs illuminates the significance of the Urim, the important liturgical object in ancient Israel mentioned in Numbers 27:21, writing, "Dice or small chips with letters of the alphabet on them, the Urim and Thummin were carried by the high priest and used to 'inquire of God' about his will concerning some specific question."<sup>45</sup> Unlike Moses, who enjoyed the privilege of direct communication with God, Joshua's questions for God would be mediated by the high priest.

Furthermore, in describing Moses's unique access to God, the book of Exodus also describes that Joshua was left out of the loop in conversations between Moses and God: "Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then he would return to the camp; but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent."<sup>46</sup> Joshua did not get to witness Moses speaking directly to God, and neither would he be allowed to inquire directly of God as he led Israel.

As Stubbs explains, "While Moses's relationship with God was quite direct, leaders after Moses did not have the same intimacy with God."<sup>47</sup> A change in leadership required a change in the rules of engagement when it came to dialogue between God and the heads of Israel. Or, as aptly summarized by Old Testament scholars Luis Alonso Schökel and Guillermo Guitérrez, "Joshua will occupy Moses' place, but he will not have

---

<sup>45</sup> Stubbs, *Numbers*, 212.

<sup>46</sup> Exodus 33:11 (NRSV).

<sup>47</sup> Stubbs, *Numbers*, 212.

all his powers.”<sup>48</sup> While the specific reasons for this change lie in the inscrutable wisdom of God, it is clear that God told Moses to pass some, but not all, of his authority to Joshua. At that moment, Moses needed to drop the baton.

### ***When God Instructed Joshua to Drop the Baton***

Moses was not the only party in this leadership transition required to drop the baton. God’s command to Joshua, cited in the introduction to this thesis, indicates that if his tenure was to be successful, he would also have to drop the baton. “My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites.”<sup>49</sup> Moses had led God’s people out of Egypt and through the wilderness, and now Joshua needed to lead Israel into the Promised Land, a new task that surely required a new approach. What was required to escape the grip of slavery under Pharaoh, receive the revelation at Sinai, and survive a forty-year desert sojourn differed from what was required to settle in Canaan.

In his book *The Old Testament: A Concise Introduction*, Brent A. Strawn summarizes the three divisions of the Old Testament according to the Hebrew tradition: the Pentateuch, the Prophets, and the Writings. At the end of each section, he offers a terse two-point overview. The Pentateuch, which records Moses’s leadership, Strawn

---

<sup>48</sup> Luis Alonso Schökel and Guillermo Gutiérrez, *Moses: His Mission* (Middlegreen, UK: St Paul Publications, 1990), 135.

<sup>49</sup> Joshua 1:2 (NRSV).

sums up as, “Divine Creation(s) ... Divine Command(s).”<sup>50</sup> Moses is the key player in getting God’s commands to God’s people.

The Prophets, where Joshua’s leadership is recorded, Strawn summarizes as, “God’s Mirror ... God’s *Mishpat*-and-*Tzedakah*.”<sup>51</sup> In sending Joshua across the Jordan, God intended for him to lead God’s people in a way that reflects the divine commands given through Moses, namely in the way of justice and righteousness. Just because the commands remain operative, however, does not mean the leader’s task is the same. While Moses delivered the commands, Joshua’s task was to apply them in the complex process of settling the Promised Land and establishing a nation. To do so, some aspects of Moses’s leadership had to be adapted to the new setting. Joshua too had to drop the baton.<sup>52</sup>

### ***A Missed Opportunity for Interdependence***

Several months into my stint as the interim lead pastor at WCC, I received an invitation to lunch from Garrett Spitz. At the time, Spitz was the associate pastor of PCC. Still disoriented by how quickly my life had changed following the departure of the previous pastor, I welcomed the opportunity to receive care from another pastor. Spitz undoubtedly offered me a kind listening ear during that lunch, but what I remember most

---

<sup>50</sup> Brent A. Strawn, *The Old Testament: A Concise Introduction* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 65.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 116. *Mishpat* is the Hebrew word for justice. *Tzedakah* is the Hebrew word for righteousness. The two terms are closely related. See discussion in Strawn, *A Concise Introduction*, 116.

<sup>52</sup> The divine “mirror” of the former prophets reveals Joshua was not successful in helping Israel apply God’s *Mishpat* and *Tzedakah* in their new situation. Nevertheless, the new moment required a different approach even if it was not ultimately successful. See discussion in Strawn, *A Concise Introduction*, 115-116.

clearly is a question he asked: “Why did you not use provisions in the Consortium Covenant for help?” My response? “What is the Consortium Covenant?”

Spitz went on to tell me about a group of six (at the time) missionally aligned churches that shared a common heritage through the church planting efforts of the Tabernacle Church of Norfolk. He told me about the churches’ common mission partners and projects and about the annual marriage retreat in our region that we had missed year after year. Spitz told me, “We even have a procedure to assist with pastoral censure.” I got the sense that these churches were completely committed to the health of each local congregation. They longed to support one another. I listened to Spitz dumbfounded, thinking, this information could have saved WCC some serious pain. How had I, and most others in our church, been left in the dark regarding this supportive resource? The lure of independence, especially during seasons of success, is difficult to resist.

From that lunch forward, WCC recommitted to the value of interdependence. We reconnected with the Consortium, created a quarterly rhythm of meetings to maintain our partnership, and clarified when and how our staff teams and elders would learn about the value and role of the Hampton Roads Consortium. The 2016 updated Consortium Covenant is the result of that work.<sup>53</sup>

After WCC’s unanticipated pastoral transition in 2013, seeking interdependence went on to play a key role in the successful leadership changes of the six other Consortium churches over the following decade. We consulted with one another before, during, and after each subsequent transition. Every transition was reported as successful

---

<sup>53</sup> See Appendix B.



and included dropped batons. Names changed, pastoral styles changed, and leadership structures changed. But the churches' missions endured. Unlike Moses, Joshua needed help accessing God's wisdom for the community. Per God's instructions, Moses could not pass a complete baton to Joshua. Neither could Joshua lead exactly like Moses when faced with a new task. When Moses is dead, two critical strategies for a successful pastoral transition are to drop the baton and seek interdependence.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

#### *A Towering Figure*

This thesis uses the phrase “Moses is dead” to serve as a guiding metaphor to explore pastoral transition in the independent church context. These words, spoken by God to Joshua, shook the Israelite community. Deuteronomy reminds readers how much was lost when Moses died: “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face.”<sup>1</sup> Moses was the incomparable prophet, his intimacy with God unrivaled throughout history.

Authors often use the beginning and end of their writing to signpost toward the central themes of their work. The Torah, the first section of the Old Testament, begins, “In the beginning God,” and ends, “He [Moses] was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.”<sup>2</sup> While the Torah begins with God, then, it ends with Moses. Within the Torah, Moses is second only to the creator God. “God formed man from the dust of the ground,” and Moses formed God’s people, guiding them through Passover, the Red Sea, the wilderness, and Sinai.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 34:10 (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:1 (RSV); Deuteronomy 34:11-12 (NRSV).

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 2:7 (NRSV). See also Exodus 12:13, 14:21-22, 16:1-4, and 19:17 respectively.

Given Moses's critical importance, it is no wonder that Joshua, Israel's next leader, was gripped by the temptation to avoid the reality of Moses's death. Eventually, God had to say what everyone knew was true but no one wanted to face: "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites."<sup>4</sup> It was time for new leadership, it was time for new mission, and it was time to look forward to what God wanted the people to do next. And there stood Joshua, the new leader with an imperative to move ahead but no instructions for how to do so. Joshua needed a viable strategy.

### ***Crossing the Jordan***

Imagine standing on the banks of the Jordan with Joshua. Maybe you would have wrestled with fear, anxiety, or confusion. Maybe your mind would have been filled with questions: How do we get across? What happens when we make it to the other side? What happens if we do *not* make it to the other side? Perhaps you would have prayed for the future of your community given that it was precariously dependent upon making it across that river. Or maybe you would have wondered, does anyone have a plan?

It was an exceedingly difficult moment. It still is. Church communities facing the loss of their pastor are in the same vulnerable position as the Israelites, and every organization will eventually stand with Joshua and Israel at the edge of the Jordan River. Though not all leaders are as influential as Moses, over time it is common for a pastor's identity to fuse with his church's in the minds of many congregants, until people cannot

---

<sup>4</sup> Joshua 1:2 (NRSV).

imagine the church apart from the pastor. At that moment, leaders must discern how to best traverse the obstacle of transition to remind congregants that their church exists apart from any single leader. The stakes are high. Indeed, leadership changes pose a significant threat to the life of an organization. Therefore, every church needs a viable strategy for pastoral transition.

### ***Viable Strategies***

This thesis presented five strategies for navigating pastoral transitions: look for one-eyed pastors; deploy a prophet, priest, and king; speak with candor; drop the baton; and seek interdependence. Taken together, these strategies offer churches guidance on four significant questions of pastoral transition: Who should we search for? How should we search for them? What do we say to the congregation if it all goes wrong? And finally, what contributes to things going right? Navigating leadership changes thoughtfully and effectively requires that churches know the answers to these questions and have a plan for how to address them. The strategies laid out in this thesis provide a framework for doing so.

### ***Who Should We Search For?***

Churches seeking new leadership must make a paradigm shift and look for a one-eyed pastor. During leadership transitions, churches often start by looking for a pastor who can do what the church needs done. Consulting the earliest resources from church history regarding the pastoral job description, however, reveals a search committee's primary focus should be on who the pastor *is*, not what the pastor *does*. The real issue

Gregory of Nyssa identifies it as this: Does the pastor have “a single eye toward the things of God?”<sup>5</sup> Pastors with a single eye toward the things of God pursue purity. They pursue purity personally, and they help their congregations do the same. Purity here is shorthand for a way of being completely aligned with the fullness of God’s purposes for followers of Jesus. Start with character, then consider duties.

### ***How Should We Conduct the Search?***

To find a new leader, churches must deploy a prophet, priest, and king. These roles, which mediated the covenant between God and Israel, were embodied by Jesus and transformed through his ministry. They are a paradigm through which Christlike leadership can be understood and developed. While many churches conduct pastoral searches by following a step-by-step process, the insight regarding Jesus’s roles as prophet, priest, and king, gleaned from the field of systematic theology, suggests churches should reconsider their approach. Deploying church members in the roles of Jesus puts Christlike leadership on display for the congregation even before the new pastor arrives. To find a pastor who leads like Jesus, it is best to search using the roles of Jesus.

Although step-by-step plans have the benefit of clarity and may initially bolster the community’s confidence in the pastoral search process, they are not adaptable to a church’s unique needs. They become less useful when unanticipated circumstances emerge. By contrast, deploying individuals within the church into the roles of prophet,

---

<sup>5</sup> Beeley, *Leading God’s People*, 29.

priest, and king means they are not bound by the rigidity of an inflexible process. They can adapt the church's plan as needed, address new questions quickly, and ensure the congregation is ministered to in a Christlike way throughout the process.

### ***What Do We Say If It All Goes Wrong?***

When messy and unforeseen circumstances arise, churches must speak with candor. When the transition between pastors is forced, unexpected, or painful, leaders must address the issues in a forthcoming, honest, and humble manner. Leaders often avoid speaking with candor because they fear that it will lead to questions they cannot answer. However, a brief survey of some of the country's infamous messy transitions reveals it is the lack of candor that multiplies questions from constituents. Without candor, people assume something is being hidden and may formulate all manner of untrue hypotheses in their search for the truth. By addressing the situation with candor, leaders rebuild trust and contribute to the healing process.

Transition consultants Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree confirm the dangers of failing to speak with candor when they write, "What we resist persists."<sup>6</sup> Creating a culture in which congregants feel they cannot, or should not, talk about the previous leader or acknowledge the reasons for his departure makes it less likely that the church can move forward.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Weese and Crabtree, *Elephant*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Lamentations is the Bible's guide to candor and offers churches a model for how to speak with candor. Hermeneutical analysis of the text, aided by the field of biblical studies, demonstrates how church leaders can speak with candor at the most painful moments in the life of their community. The book's acrostic poetry facilitates the complete, careful, and collective processing of trauma. When a church reaches the crossroads of honesty and obfuscation, nothing creates more competing narratives than failing to speak with candor.

### ***What Helps Transitions Go Right?***

To help ensure transitions are smooth and successful, churches should drop the baton and seek interdependence. Pastoral transitions are not a relay race in which a church is passed unchanged from one person to another. At their core, churches are relational, and relationships are cultivated like plants not passed like batons. Furthermore, every healthy organization needs to change in order to grow. What worked yesterday may not work today, and what works today may not work tomorrow. We should not carry everything from the past into the future. Viewing the interviews with the successor pastors of the Hampton Roads Consortium through the lens of practical theology revealed the principle that healthy transitions involve dropped batons. Stating this clearly at the beginning of the leadership transition process creates appropriate congregational expectations regarding both the inadvisability and impossibility of moving into the future without change.

Seeking interdependence is a strategy that accentuates the advantages of independent local congregations while limiting the liabilities of their autonomy. It takes

what is helpful from connectional churches—assistance in times of difficulty, sharing hard-won wisdom, and pooling resources for greater impact—while leaving behind innovation-diminishing denominational bureaucracy. The book of Proverbs is instructive on this point. It teaches, “Where there is no guidance, a nation falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.” It also claims, “When a land rebels it has many rulers.”<sup>8</sup> Seeking interdependence offers safety during the dangerous transition period when a new pastor steps in to lead by allowing for counsel from other, more stable churches while avoiding the “many rulers” effect of mandates from denominational officials that might undermine what the local church believes is best.

Seeking the kind of interdependence this thesis recommends is a time-consuming process. It took three years after my church, WCC, expressed a desire for renewed interdependence for the churches of the Hampton Roads Consortium to re-formalize our commitment to the value in the 2016 covenant. Whether you are facing a transition imminently or anticipating a leadership transition ten years into the future, the best practice is to start the process now.

### ***Where to Find Additional Resources***

This thesis approached the problem of pastoral transition by studying success, listening to stories, giving voice to successors, and reflecting on the findings through the lens of the classical theological disciplines. Following a similar process would allow other churches to find resources beyond the strategies offered here.

---

<sup>8</sup> Proverbs 11:14 and 28:2 (NRSV).



Over the past ten years, national media has reported on a plethora of failed transitions at high-profile churches across the country. While several of these widely broadcast failures were mentioned for illustrative purposes, the primary data set this thesis analyzed was the seven independent churches known collectively as the Hampton Roads Consortium.<sup>9</sup> Quietly, without news coverage, each of these churches has successfully transitioned from one pastor to another over the course of a decade. We tend to give a great deal of attention to things that go wrong, but there is much to be learned from the things that go right, even within small pockets of churches. Is there a successful pastoral transition in your area that could provide lessons applicable to your church? Consider taking the time to study it.

Remembering Brian McCormack’s words—“Statistics prove change is necessary. Stories prove change is possible.”—could also offer instructive insights.<sup>10</sup> A sense of defeat and impossibility often looms large during times of transition. Listening to stories reminds us that communities do make it across the Jordan and into new seasons of ministry. People often criticize leaders assisting congregations through transitions. Stories remind people that reality is not a new phenomenon. In seasons of change, every congregation gets anxious and lashes out. Stories can offer a sense of stability through the rough parts of the journey. Other churches made it through their leadership change and productively continued in their life and mission, and so can yours. What stories are you listening to? Are you subsisting on a diet of the failed transitions of high-profile mega

---

<sup>9</sup> See Smietana, “Willow Creek Cuts Staff;” Gryboski, “Piper’s Successor Resigns;” and, Cosper, “Rise and Fall.”

<sup>10</sup> McCormack, “The Possible Church,” 31.

churches, or are you seeking out stories of success in the ordinary churches in your region?

Giving voice to successors also offers useful insight as you navigate transitions. No matter how well intentioned, a succeeded pastor does not have first-hand experience with the consequences, good and bad, of how she approached the transition. Talking to successor pastors reveals what actually helped and hindered the community in the wake of their predecessor's departure. Succeeded pastors had theories about what would work; successor pastors lived with the results. Dialogue with successor pastors also assists in identifying practices that stood the test of time. So, is there a successor pastor in your community you could learn from?

Finally, this thesis examined its findings through the lens of the classical theological disciplines: historical theology, systematic theology, biblical studies, and practical theology. Working within the context of the theological disciplines put the principles gleaned from a ten-year period in the Hampton Roads Consortium into conversation with the timeless wisdom of the Christian theological tradition. If a church desires to further explore the topic of pastoral transition, the classical theological disciplines are replete with lessons, ideas, and insights.

Historical theology, for example, contains myriad examples and case studies that may address the questions a church has been struggling to answer, or release the church to think beyond the present moment and see itself as part of a rich historical tradition. Systematic theology, meanwhile, could assist a search committee in building a robust ecclesiology, which would provide a safeguard against putting pastors on pedestals. That same ecclesiology has the potential to remind the church of its true identity and purpose.

The Bible itself, meanwhile, contains many examples of leadership transitions, some exemplary, others cautionary. The transition from Moses to Joshua is only the beginning, and a careful reading of any of these stories would aid a church during its shift from one leader to another. Finally, resources in practical theology would help a church with the plethora of real-world decisions required during the course of a leadership transition. Practical theologies on the topics of sabbath and sabbatical could even assist churches in implementing practices that keep pastors healthy throughout their tenure and diminish the risk of sudden or forced transitions.<sup>11</sup>

### *A Final Interview*

While the target audience for this thesis is the independent church, it was written with the hope that denominationally affiliated churches might also use it, either as a helpful conversation partner or as a source of insight from the independent wing of the church. But independent churches can also learn from their denominational counterparts. As discussed, part of what makes pastoral transitions in the independent church so difficult is that there is no bishop to call and no presbytery to consult. There is no clear access to help when a church needs it most.

To put my interviews with the pastors of the Hampton Roads Consortium into context and gain insight on the kind of help independent churches are missing, I

---

<sup>11</sup> The Williamsburg Community Chapel's sabbatical policy played a critical role in my healing following a pastoral transition. See Appendix E for an example policy that can be adapted in a variety of church contexts. For insight on the benefits of predictable and enforced time off from the field of business, see Leslie A. Perlow and Jessica L. Porter, "Making Time Off Predictable and Required," *Harvard Business Review*, August 27, 2021, <https://hbr.org/2009/10/making-time-off-predictable-and-required>.

conducted one final interview, this time with the Rev. Allan Poole, the longtime pastor of Blacknall Presbyterian Church in Durham, North Carolina. Over the course of his career, Rev. Poole was both the successor and the succeeded at Blacknall. He also served successfully as the interim pastor at National Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC. When asked what it means to have a presbytery to call during a time of transition, all of Rev. Poole's responses led to one conclusion: develop a process.

Poole made it clear that in the denominational context, "there is always a process to follow."<sup>12</sup> He stated this as plainly as possible, like someone saying, "the sky is blue." It is just a fact that denominations have processes. Meanwhile, independent churches are often caught flat-footed when the time for transition arrives. At WCC, the moment a member of the board tasked with finding a new pastor asked, "What does this board do?" was the moment I realized we desperately needed a process.

Poole pointed out that the process outlined in his denominational context was the result of "wisdom that has been gathered over years."<sup>13</sup> Many independent churches, by contrast, "end up reinventing the wheel, and the wheel comes out square."<sup>14</sup> Analyzing this image, Poole continued, "Those edges are only rounded off with time." Often, independent churches simply do not have long enough histories to round off the mistakes of past processes through corrective actions. When making their most recent pastoral transition, just two churches in the Hampton Roads Consortium had access to wisdom

---

<sup>12</sup> Allan Poole, "Denominational Perspective on Succession Planning," interview by author, January 25, 2024 (Durham, NC).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

gained from three or more transitions. By contrast, at the end of 2022, the Presbyterian Church (USA), which Rev. Poole served before his retirement, consisted of 8,704 churches, many of them facing transitions at any given time, all gradually refining the church's processes.<sup>15</sup>

Some processes in the Presbyterian church stem from what Poole intriguingly called, "The polity of suspicion."<sup>16</sup> Presbyterians are suspicious of locating too much authority in too few people.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, independent churches often imbue a single pastor with copious amounts of authority, putting them at the whim of one person's positive or negative life choices. Willow Creek Community Church, referenced in the introduction, is one example of this, and it experienced significant setbacks when it attempted to move on from founding pastor, Bill Hybels. Mars Hill Church, mentioned in chapter four, closed altogether shortly after ousting their pastor, Mark Driscoll.

Poole noted that Presbyterians are suspicious of "easy answers and quick fixes" in addition to being suspicious of vesting authority in individual clergy.<sup>18</sup> Their commitment to a lengthy process recognizes the complexity of pastoral transitions. It ensures issues are thoroughly examined and the community is given ample time for discernment.

---

<sup>15</sup> Rick Jones, "PC (USA) Church Membership Still in Decline," Presbyterian Church (USA), May 1, 2023, <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2023/5/1/pcusa-church-membership-still-in-decline/>.

<sup>16</sup> Poole interview.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Even though Poole highlighted the helpful nature of his denomination’s process, he was also honest about the dark side. He said, “They tend to create processes that are intended to avoid the worst possible outcomes.”<sup>19</sup> For example, to avoid any temptation toward fractiousness, associate pastors are not allowed to apply for a senior pastor vacancy at the church they are currently serving.<sup>20</sup> The result is that associate pastors who may be a quality fit for a congregation are denied the opportunity to enter a discernment process about the vacant senior role.

Another difficult aspect of at least the Presbyterian process is that, upon departure from staff, senior pastors must attend a different church. After serving his congregation faithfully for thirty-six years, Rev. Poole, per the Presbyterian process, must worship elsewhere. By forcing that departure, the Presbyterian church places a mountain of institutional and relational knowledge at arms-length rather than allowing it to remain readily accessible.<sup>21</sup>

While no formal process can replace wisdom and discernment, it is clear that independent churches can learn a great deal from their denominational counterparts.<sup>22</sup> At

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Additional research is needed regarding how to incorporate former senior church leaders into the life of the congregation. Poole is likely correct that the Presbyterian prohibition on former clergy attending the church is a guardrail against some of the worst possible outcomes. The question remains, however, at what cost are we guarding against these negative outcomes? In the Hampton Roads Consortium, one succeeded pastor moved into a different staff position while another retained a position on the board. Consider a possible model from the world of health care administration succession: A former administrator said his new role included special projects, “class” historian, and community ambassador. This may contain broad brushstroke application for churches desiring a healthy, productive, and formalized connection with a departed pastor. Anonymous, personal conversation with author, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Poole interview.

its best, process creates the boundaries within which community discernment and wisdom emerge. Independent churches should be intentional about developing processes around pastoral transition (though those processes do not need to include a step-by-step plan) so that they are not caught off guard when the moment of transition arrives. Boards and church leaders should revisit their processes often and refine it according to experience and new learning. The strategies presented in this thesis are an ideal starting point for independent churches to begin the development of their processes. They may also assist denominational churches by injecting some creativity in the stale parts of their approach.

### ***The Two Ideals to Practice***

No matter how, or to what extent, a church practices the strategies outlined in this thesis, leaders should consider how to practice two transition ideals: honor and blessing.<sup>23</sup> When a pastor has served honorably, everyone involved in the transition process, particularly the successor pastor, should find opportunities to honor the outgoing pastor's service. When a pastor has not served honorably, especially in cases of spiritual, physical, or sexual abuse, leaders should consider how to best honor the stories of survivors. In addition, when it would be a blessing for the community, church leadership should provide a platform for the succeeded pastor to bless the church and the ministry of the next pastor. Abundant honor and blessing will cover a multitude of transition-related missteps. Because they are both cathartic and preparatory, doing these two things well

---

<sup>23</sup> Weese and Crabtree, *Elephant*, 54. While the author advocates for something slightly different than Weese and Crabtree, their ideas influenced the author's thinking in this section.

can revive a weary congregation at the end of even the most difficult transition process. They help the congregation make sense of the past and prepare them for what is next.

All too often, new leaders prioritize their pride and do not honor the former leader. However, when someone honors their predecessor, they walk in the way of Jesus. Jesus himself publicly honored his predecessor, John the Baptist.<sup>24</sup> When religious leaders questioned his authority, Jesus responded by lifting up John the Baptist: “For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”<sup>25</sup> Jesus affirmed John even in the face of his staunchest critics.

Jesus also blessed his successors, the apostles: “Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.”<sup>26</sup> In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus’s final act is to bless those charged with carrying on his ministry. In fact, he is engaged in the very act of blessing as he departs. What an image to consider for pastoral transitions! Perhaps knowing the persecution to come, Jesus felt it was critical for his successors to carry a sense of his blessing as they took over as leaders of the new movement. Whatever the reason, Jesus refused to risk a forgotten blessing. The last auditory trace Jesus left of himself was the sound of blessing ringing in the disciples’ ears.

---

<sup>24</sup> Weese and Crabtree, *Elephant*, 16.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 21:32 (NRSV).

<sup>26</sup> Luke 24:50-51 (NRSV).



It took years at WCC to discern the right way to practice these ideals. There was a great deal of acrimony surrounding the departure of the previous pastor, Bill Warrick, in 2013. Some people were angry at the pastor. Others were angry at the board. Despite numerous attempts at rapprochement by a variety of parties, the contention persisted until Warrick's untimely death from colon cancer in June 2020.

About six months after his death, I believed it was time to find the right way to express gratitude for how God used Bill to build much of what we enjoyed as a church. I put his picture, along with his late predecessor's, up in the east hallway of our church. The choice to include our first long-tenured pastor too was intentional. As you express gratitude to those through whom God chose to work, it is vital to send signals that Jesus is still the True Pastor of the Church. Reminding people of the variety of leaders God had used at WCC gently communicated that the work of the church is not dependent on one person.

I placed a short caption under the pictures. It read, "We are grateful for our late senior pastors and their commitment to help us fulfill our mission as a church." It was a one sentence thank you note from the successor about the succeeded. I found what I believed even those frustrated with the pastor's failings could celebrate, and I simply said, "Thank you." I sent a picture to Bill's wife and daughters to make sure they knew I was grateful for their husband's and father's ministry.

Approximately six months later, I received a call from Lindy Warrick, Bill's widow. We decided to meet and share our answers to the question, "What have the last ten years been like for you?" We simply listened to each other. These were deeply healing conversations. Eventually the sharing became blessing. We asked God to bless

the next season of one another's lives. For me, this was a blessing to continue pastoring the church. For Warrick, the blessing was for a move to be closer to some of her grandchildren. Then we considered what else needed to be done to expand the healing we experienced to others. We decided to do publicly what we had done privately—say thank you and bless each other.

On the final Sunday before her move, Lindy Warrick and I stood together before the entire church and honored one another, expressing gratitude for one another, praying prayers of blessings over one another, and expressing our prayers for the wellbeing of the church. We needed lots of tissues that Sunday. My tears reflected a sense that, after ten long years, portions of our church, including me, were no longer slogging through the Jordan. We had successfully completed the transition. We were somewhere new.

After the service, I attempted to share my gratitude with Warrick. I said, “Thank you for reaching out to reconnect,” but she interrupted, saying that I had made the first move. I responded, “But you called me.” She clarified then that she had felt safe asking to speak with me because of the note I had sent and the public thanksgiving I had expressed. To God be the glory! Only God could transform a single sentence honoring how God worked through a predecessor's ministry into a multitude of blessings, for me, the Warrick family, the church community, and for anyone who desired healing.

The prophet Isaiah saw a vision of restoration where warring nations “beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks.” Imagine the excruciatingly hard work required to contort a sword into a plowshare. Imagine the patience necessary to heat and bend a spear into a pruning hook. Imagine the expenses involved in obtaining the costly objects, only to invest significant sweat equity into repurposing them.

Isaiah’s vision was not of someone praying a sword into a plowshare or hoping a spear into a pruning hook. While prayer and hope are important biblical values, that is not what Isaiah saw this time. He envisioned people doing the hard work necessary to beat something dangerous out of existence. He saw people engaged in the struggle required to bend something productive into existence. Likewise, replacing something that can damage a community—a pastoral transition—with something that cultivates a harvest for a community—honor and blessing—is the ideal reality to pursue. While there may be especially tragic circumstances where this is not possible, think critically through your situation and determine if there is *some* way you can practice honor and blessing.

### ***How Moses Died***

Joshua 1:2 makes it clear that Moses is dead, but how did he die? Deuteronomy narrates the moment like this: “Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD’s command.”<sup>27</sup> God was responsible for Moses’s death, and God defined the moment of transition to a new leader. The Hebrew word translated as “command” literally means, “at the mouth of.”<sup>28</sup> God and Moses, then, were quite close until the very end. Nevertheless, if someone in ancient Israel heard the news, announced at the beginning of the book of Joshua, “Moses is dead,” and questioned how he died, the answer was not sickness or disease. Deuteronomy reports that at the time of Moses’s

---

<sup>27</sup> Deuteronomy 34:5 (NRSV).

<sup>28</sup> Duane L. Christensen, *Word Biblical Commentary: Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12*, vol. 6B of World Biblical Commentary, ed. by Bruce M. Metzger (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 871.

death, “his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated.”<sup>29</sup> How, then, did Moses die? At God’s command.

Put differently, God *required* a leadership transition from Moses to Joshua, and God requires leadership transitions today. Leaders are never permanent. Without healthy transitions, businesses, non-profits, governments, NGOs, churches, and every other organization cannot fulfill their mission. Apart from successful changes in leadership there is no lasting impact. Moses dies every day. When the next pastoral transition takes place at your church, may you possess the viable strategies to move the community from one leader to another, from loss to mission, from “Moses is dead” to the other side of the Jordan.

---

<sup>29</sup> Deuteronomy 34:7 (NRSV).

## APPENDIX A

### **Hampton Roads Consortium Covenant, 15 May 2004, Norfolk, Virginia**

#### *Preamble*

##### **Whereas:**

- The Lord led His people seven decades ago to initiate a new ministry in Norfolk called “Tabernacle Church of Norfolk;”
- Godly men and women led and sacrificed to support this ministry in such a way that it spawned new ministries in Hampton Roads and around the world;
- Four like-minded churches were planted in Virginia Beach, Williamsburg, Chesapeake, and York County;
- These churches have grown and developed into successful and independent ministries, but have, together with Tabernacle Church of Norfolk, recognized the strength of their solidarity and their uniqueness in Hampton Roads;
- The church constitutions for each ministry share the same statement of faith and similar policies and procedures;
- The pastors of these churches have been meeting together, praying, discussing, and seeking the Lord’s guidance; and
- All five churches believe God is leading them into a closer, more committed, and more collaborative relationship for the growth of His Kingdom;

**It is proposed that Tabernacle Church of Norfolk, Virginia Beach Community Chapel, Williamsburg Community Chapel, Community Church of Chesapeake, and Peninsula Community Chapel, for God’s glory and the good of their respective congregations, formalize a deeper and more profound covenant relationship as described herein.**

#### *Vision*

##### **Our vision could be summarized as follows:**

Without question, our ministries have enjoyed the blessing of God. As a non-denominationally affiliated church movement, we are unique in Hampton Roads. Through nearly 70 years of ministry, God has kept us faithful to His Word and His Kingdom priorities.

Together, we have taken the Gospel to the ends of the earth and invested profoundly in ministries here in Hampton Roads. Today, we support missionaries in 50 different countries and, combined, have an annual missions budget of \$2 million. We have started or helped to start numerous ministries in Hampton Roads, including Triple R Ranch, Norfolk Christian Schools, National Institute of Learning Disabilities, Urban Discovery Ministries, International Cooperating Ministries, Faith Bible College, and Summit Christian Academy. Our combined congregations total 4300 people.

Our movement has also attracted other ministries. There are additional churches that have shared in our heritage and fellowship with us in the Consortium including Faith Community Church, Mt. Zion Fellowship, and Urban Community Church of Norfolk.

John Dunlap, Gene Garrick, and Dick Woodward were our movement's first-generation leaders. Second generation leaders are our current senior pastors: Rich Hardison, Larry Shoaf, Bill Warrick, Scott Hill, and Tom Kenney. Each has historic ties to our founders and embodies our distinctives. It is only natural that, as church leadership is passed in the decades to come to third generation leaders that our ministries would move further away from each other. This, we have determined, is not what the Lord would want.

We have a vision that we can be more effective together than we would be on our own.

We have a vision for a commitment to each other that would allow us to keep our individual identity and yet work together to see greater growth for the Kingdom of God in Hampton Roads and around the world.

We have a vision to join together to protect the work of God in our churches from the attacks of the enemy.

We have a vision to demonstrate to our children through our ministries that God is at work everywhere, through believers who have joined hands and hearts, sacrificially committing themselves to the business of eternity, persevering against all obstacles, encouraging one another to step out in faith, and believing together that God is willing and able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask for or imagine.

We have a vision to commit ourselves to each other for God's glory and our good.

### *Values*

**As like-minded ministries, we believe we share the following values:**

#### **Leadership Development**

Together we commit to growing the next generation of servant-leaders for our ministries by identifying and training the emerging leaders in our congregations.

#### **World Missions**

Together we commit to take Christ and His message of grace to those parts of the world where the local church is weak or nonexistent.

### **Church Planting**

Together we commit to helping one another discern why, where and how to best plant new churches in strategic Hampton Roads locations.

### **Local Outreach**

Together we value the spiritually lost and disconnected people in our community and will use every available Christ-honoring means to pursue, reach and mature them while also seeking to be redemptive forces of justice and mercy in the communities in which God has placed us.

### **Biblical Teaching & Preaching**

We strive to teach and preach God's Word with integrity, creativity and authority so that those without God are drawn to Christ and believers mature in Him.

### **Common Heritage**

Together we commit to visionary ministry growth and development built upon a legacy of shared faith, values, vision, and sacrifice.

### **Broadly Evangelical**

Together we are committed to helping one another, as non-denominational churches, to remain broadly evangelical united in the essentials, understanding in minor doctrinal discrepancies, and charitable in all things.

### **Cooperative Partnership**

Together we commit to cooperating and partnering with one another in various ways on various projects or ministries in order to leverage and maximize our individual and collective impact for Christ.

## *Commitments*

**In signing the Consortium Covenant, we make the following commitments to one another:**

1. Stay true to Consortium Vision and Values;
2. Work together on selected projects and priorities, as proposed by Consortium churches and agreed to by individual church leadership boards;
3. Consult other Consortium churches when making a senior pastoral change;
4. Participate in the ordination of Consortium ministers;
5. Be prepared to assist Consortium churches in pastoral censure (see attached); and
6. Keep each other true to the Gospel and faithful to the Lord.

## *Action*

Review the Consortium Covenant with church leadership and amend or modify as necessary in order to make a commitment by September 30.



## APPENDIX B

### **Hampton Roads Consortium Covenant, 13 November 2016, Norfolk, Virginia**

#### *Preamble*

##### **Whereas:**

- The Lord led His people in 1935 to initiate a new ministry in Norfolk called "Tabernacle Church of Norfolk;"
- Godly men and women led and sacrificed to support this ministry in such a way that it spawned new ministries in Hampton Roads and around the world;
- Five like-minded churches were planted in Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Williamsburg, Chesapeake, and York County with a sixth added in Suffolk;
- These churches have grown and developed into successful and independent ministries, but have, together recognized the strength of their solidarity and their uniqueness in Hampton Roads;
- The church constitutions for each ministry share the same statement of faith and similar policies and procedures;
- The pastors of these churches have been meeting together, praying, discussing, and seeking the Lord's guidance; and
- All six churches believe God is leading them into a closer, more committed, and more collaborative relationship for the growth of His Kingdom;

**It is proposed that Tabernacle Church of Norfolk, Virginia Beach Community Chapel, Williamsburg Community Chapel, Community Church of Chesapeake, and Peninsula Community Chapel, and James River Community Church for God's glory and the good of their respective congregations, formalize a deeper and more profound covenant relationship as described herein.**

#### *Vision*

##### **Our vision could be summarized as follows**

Unique in Hampton Roads, as a non-denominational affiliated church movement, we have enjoyed the blessing of God. Through more than 80 years of ministry, God has kept us faithful to His Word and His Kingdom priorities.

Together, we have taken the Gospel to the ends of the earth and invested profoundly in ministries here in Hampton Roads. We collectively support missions work in dozens of countries and remain committed to using a significant portion of our respective budgets to raise, send, and support missionaries around the world. We have started or helped to start numerous ministries in Hampton Roads, including Triple R Ranch, Norfolk Christian Schools, National Institute of Learning Development, Urban Discovery Ministries, International Cooperating Ministries, Faith Bible College, Summit Christian Academy, and Global Friendship House.

Other churches that have shared in our heritage and enjoyed fellowship with us in the Consortium include Faith Community Church, Mt. Zion Fellowship (now James River Community Church), Urban Community Church of Norfolk and Peninsula East End Church of Newport News. Our movement has also partnered with ministries outside Hampton Roads such as Serve the City (International and USA), and G.L.O.B.E. (the George Liele Objective for Black Enterprise). We are passionate about reaching and impacting our neighbors as well as people around the world who are unengaged and unreached with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As we grow, we want to maintain a Kingdom perspective as the motive not only for our mission, but also for our partnerships within the Consortium and beyond.

John Dunlap, Gene Garrick, and Dick Woodward were our movement's first-generation leaders who established the vision and initiated many of the church-plants and ministries bearing fruit today. Our commitment over the years to developing new leaders within our churches has produced a second and third generation of pastors and leaders who have sustained and grown the movement. As we prepare for the next and future generations, we desire to preserve the distinctive qualities, relationships, and heritage of our churches and the Consortium. Furthermore, we believe nurturing our common vision and continued cooperation will honor and serve the Lord as He works through us to build His Kingdom.

Our vision for the Consortium is as follows:

- To be more effective in our "strategic alliance" than we would on our own.
- To partner in ways that allow us to keep our individual identity and yet work together to see greater growth for the Kingdom of God in Hampton Roads and around the world.
- To join together to protect the work of God in our churches from the attacks of the enemy.
- To demonstrate to the next generation through our ministries that God is at work everywhere, through believers who have joined hands and hearts, sacrificially committing themselves to the business of eternity, persevering against all obstacles, encouraging one another to step out in faith, and believing together that God is willing and able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask for or imagine.
- To commit ourselves to each other and to nurture the unity of the Spirit among us for God's glory and our good.

## *Values*

*As like-minded ministries, we believe we share the following values:*

### **Leadership Development**

Together we commit to growing the next generation of servant-leaders for our ministries by identifying and training the emerging leaders in our congregations.

### **World Missions**

Together we commit to take Christ and His message of grace to those parts of the world where the local church is weak or nonexistent.

### **Church Planting**

Together we commit to helping one another discern why, where and how to best plant new churches in strategic Hampton Roads locations.

### **Local Outreach**

Together we value the spiritually lost and disconnected people in our community and will use every available Christ-honoring means to pursue, reach and mature them while also seeking to be redemptive forces of justice and mercy in the communities in which God has placed us.

### **Biblical Teaching & Preaching**

We strive to teach and preach God's word with integrity, creativity and authority so that those without God are drawn to Christ and believers mature in Him.

### **Common Heritage**

Together we commit to visionary ministry growth and development built upon a legacy of shared faith, values, vision, and sacrifice.

### **Broadly Evangelical**

Together we are committed to helping one another, as non-denominational churches, to remain broadly evangelical: united in the essentials, understanding in minor doctrinal discrepancies, and charitable in all things.

### **Cooperative Partnership**

Together we commit to cooperating and partnering with one another in various ways on various projects or ministries in order to leverage and maximize our individual and collective impact for Christ.

## *Consortium Involvement in Pastoral Censure*

### **The Need**

Independent evangelical churches are susceptible to church splits for many reasons. One

reason can be the *valid* dismissal of a senior pastor for moral failure, changes in philosophy of ministry (for instance the dropping of interest in world missions) or doctrinal reasons. Alister McGrath in *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (IVP, 1995) comments on this under "The Curse of the Evangelical Personality Cult" (p. 148f). His *advice* is that we need to encourage the Reformational idea of the priesthood of all believers.

*The Reformation principle is public accountability of preachers to the Word of God and the right of all believers to read and interpret Scripture and challenge their pastors where they appear to deny it, depart from it or subtract from it. (p. 157)*

## **The Proposal**

The Consortium shall function as a tool to help the priesthood within an individual church exercise its duty relative to pastoral censure.

## **The Process**

1. Maintaining Elders' connection to the Consortium
  - a. Elder candidate training will include the role of the Consortium in the life of his church.
  - b. Elders are exposed to the Consortium at least annually. Relationships are nurtured.
  - c. The Board of Elders will renew its commitment to the Consortium and its Core Values on an annual basis.
2. Engaging the Consortium
  - a. When a congregation *believes* a pastor should be asked to resign, that congregation's elders may ask the Consortium leadership to convene a sub-committee to help assess the situation.
  - b. That committee (CSC) will meet with the elders and the pastor in question. The CSC will be given access to people and documents in the church for interviews and study.
  - c. The CSC will report to the whole Consortium Council (elders and senior pastors from each church). That Council will be allowed to make its findings known to the congregation requesting the help.
3. Considerations
  - a. At no time will the Consortium overrule the membership or Board of Elders of the local church. The Consortium's role will be advisory only.
  - b. This process may only be initiated by the Board of Elders in the local church experiencing the difficulty.
  - c. When a pastor has resigned (under censure or otherwise) from a Consortium church, the elders will inform the Consortium.

## ***Commitments***

**In signing the Consortium Covenant, we make the following commitments to one another:**

1. Stay true to Consortium Vision and Values;
2. Work together on selected projects and priorities, as proposed by Consortium churches and agreed to by individual church leadership boards;
3. Consult other Consortium churches when making a senior pastoral change;
4. Participate in the ordination of Consortium ministers;
5. Be prepared to assist Consortium churches in pastoral censure; and
6. Keep each other true to the Gospel and faithful to the Lord

## APPENDIX C

### **Interview Questions for the Hampton Roads Consortium's Successor Pastors**

1. Please share the story of how you transitioned into your current pastoral role in around ten minutes.
2. What were the difficult aspects of your transition process?
3. Do you consider your transition successful? If so, what made it successful? If not, what could have made it more successful?
4. What helped the congregation through the process? What hindered the congregation through the process?
5. Please talk about the role a pastoral search team, or some other similar body, played in the process at your church.
6. What do you believe was most important to your church in looking for a pastor?
7. What parts of your transition process will you seek to emulate when you leave your role? What parts of your process will you attempt to change?

APPENDIX D

**Large Church Size Dynamics<sup>30</sup>**

<b>Size Category (Average Weekend)</b>	<b>The Multi- Celled Church</b>	<b>The Professional Church</b>	<b>The Strategic Church</b>	<b>The Matrix Church</b>
<b>Attendance -or- Annual Operating Budget</b>	<b>250-400</b>  <b>\$400,000- \$1,000,000</b>	<b>400-800</b>  <b>\$1,000,000- \$2,000,000</b>	<b>800-1200</b>  <b>\$2,000,000- \$4,000,000</b>	<b>1,200-1,800</b>  <b>\$4,000,000 +</b>
<b>ORGANIZING THEME</b>	<b>LEADERSHIP DEVELOP- MENT</b>	<b>PROFESSION- ALIZATION</b>	<b>ALIGNMENT</b>	<b>DECENTRAL- IZATION</b>
<i>Growth Challenges</i>	<i>Examine assumptions about growth.</i>  The congregation must come to terms with how it understands and defines growth, and whether the culture will accommodate growth. Leaders must claim a strategic identity and define growth accordingly.	<i>Build capacity for growth on the staff team.</i>  Ideas to generate growth abound but are limited by the capacity of the staff team and limitations in the facility. The church's capacity for growth is largely a function of the size of its budget.	<i>Assume growth and plan for it.</i>  Lack of growth will lead to stagnation and ultimately to decline. Growth is an ongoing management issue. The nature and direction of growth has to be continually negotiated and planned.	<i>Manage growth from multiple places.</i>  Independent functional ministry areas and locations are all working on their own growth initiatives. Growth initiatives are coordinated through the strategic planning and operational budgeting processes.

---

<sup>30</sup> Adapted from Susan Beaumont, *Inside the Large Congregation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 44-46.

<p><i>Pastoral Challenges</i></p>	<p><i>Adopt a visionary leadership style.</i></p> <p>The senior clergy leader must: Discern and articulate an energizing vision for the congregation and translate vision into specific goals to be accomplished. Clearly describe who the congregation is and is not, and what its mission is and is not. Communicate a caring presence in the congregation while reducing the level of one-on-one care provided to congregation members.</p>	<p><i>Adopt a managerial leadership style.</i></p> <p>The senior clergy leader must: Let go of a purely relational style of leadership and engage the congregation from a managerial perspective. Shift the care focus from the congregation at large to the staff team and key lay leaders. Manage the collective performance of the staff team.</p>	<p><i>Adopt a strategic leadership style.</i></p> <p>The senior clergy leader must: Focus on the right things, say no to the wrong things, and spend time on the important things. Let go of day-to-day management decisions, find ways to pull back and see the big picture, and learn to lead through the projection of a public persona. Crystallize the vision of the church into clear sound bites that keep the staff team and board in alignment.</p>	<p><i>Adopt an ideation leadership style.</i></p> <p>The senior clergy leader must: Focus exclusively on strategy, teaching, preaching, and fundraising. Lead the staff team and board with clear statements of vision, values, and strategic priorities. Create a culture that supports the generation of new ideas and innovation. Delegate the day-to-day management of the church.</p>
<p><i>Staff Team Challenges</i></p>	<p><i>Embrace a team identity.</i></p> <p>The team must: Add specialized program staff</p>	<p><i>Professionalize the ministry.</i></p> <p>The team must: Assume tasks previously accomplished</p>	<p><i>Align work of multiple sub-teams.</i></p> <p>Staff must: Avoid silo mentality. Maintain a</p>	<p><i>Create cross-functional structure.</i></p> <p>Staff must: Communicate and coordinate, sometimes</p>



	<p>to grow the church when the budget may not be fully ready to support staff additions. Learn to balance the work of the generalist alongside the work of the specialist.</p>	<p>by volunteers. Find new ways to engage volunteers. Move away from a generalist orientation to distinct areas of specialization. Accept supervision from someone other than the senior clergy leader.</p>	<p>relational focus in program roles as the administrative components of roles increase. Grow the administrative team to accommodate additional growth in the church. Learn to work under the direction of an executive leadership team.</p>	<p>around dual reporting relationships. Maintain a dual focus on their functional areas of responsibility, and attend to the needs of multiple sites and/or constituencies. Decentralize decision-making</p>
<p><i>Board Challenges</i></p>	<p><i>Organize work around mission.</i></p> <p>Board leaders must:          Coordinate the work of a variety of committees and groups.          Learn to say yes to ideas and activities that support the mission and not to ideas that distract the congregation from its mission.          Develop new lay leadership.</p>	<p><i>Create management systems.</i></p> <p>Board leaders must:          Create policies and establish a staff team performance management system.          Relinquish the daily management of the church to the staff team.</p>	<p><i>Reduce size of governing body.</i></p> <p>The board must:          Provide a strong support and accountability system for the head of staff.          Operate with strategic mindset, letting go of representational thinking.          Create an executive team (if board size is larger than 7 people.)          Other leaders</p>	<p><i>Decentralize decision-making.</i></p> <p>The board must:          Empower each ministry venue to make decisions about growth in their own areas.          Institute a systematic approach to program evaluation to keep the number of programming options workable.</p>

			must: Learn to trust the decision-making lead of a smaller group.	
<i>Assimilation Challenges</i>	<i>Expand points of entry.</i>  The congregation must: Add new worship venues, small group ministries, etc. Meet emerging standards of excellence that people expect from a larger congregation.	<i>Watch the back door.</i>  The congregation must: Address the anonymity that occurs in the large church. Find new ways to keep track of members and to get members engaged. Let the staff team take the lead in identifying and developing new leaders.	<i>Create a seamless system of membership.</i>  The congregation must: Link membership, discipleship, gift discovery, and stewardship through a fully formed network of classes or small groups. Add a staff member who focuses on membership and volunteer management. Empower newcomers to find their own way into participation and membership.	<i>Coordinate participation across venues.</i>  The congregation must: Create a membership/development department to coordinate the many venues of entry, so a unified perspective on membership is generated. Hire a development director Customize and coordinate programs of orientation, and membership so that each venue is unique, but unified.

## APPENDIX E

### **Williamsburg Community Chapel Sabbatical Policy**

Effective July 1, 2014, updated November 4, 2016

This policy includes all full-time members of Williamsburg Community Chapel's pastoral team.

#### ***Definition of sabbatical leave***

Williamsburg Community Chapel defines a sabbatical as a period of time for professional development and spiritual renewal, and/or an opportunity to lie fallow for revitalization of the body, mind, and soul. Continuing education and vacation time are covered under separate policies.

#### ***Eligibility***

Pastors are eligible for sabbatical leave after six (6) full years have passed since their ordination at the Chapel or since the Chapel's recognition of their ordination. Following the employee's initial sabbatical, subsequent ones may be taken after six (6) full years of additional continuous service. Sabbatical leave does not accumulate. By electing to take sabbatical leave, the pastor agrees to honor their employment agreement by providing at least one additional year of service upon return from leave.

Pastors are strongly encouraged to take their sabbatical leave during each seventh year of service, and must seek elder approval if the sabbatical leave is to be delayed.

#### ***Duration of leave***

A sabbatical shall be taken for a continuous period of twelve weeks. In order to maximize the benefits of sabbatical leave, intermittent leave is not permitted. Only one pastor may be on sabbatical leave at any time.

#### ***Impact on salary and benefits***

Employees on sabbatical leave will receive their full salary and benefits for the duration of the leave. In order to honor the purpose of sabbatical leave, pastors may not receive or earn additional income while on leave. Upon commencement of the sabbatical, Williamsburg Community Chapel will provide an expense advance of ten percent of the employee's annual salary for expenses that may be incurred during the leave period in conjunction with the sabbatical plan. This is considered taxable wages. The expense advance must be repaid in full if a pastor voluntarily leaves Chapel employment prior to providing an additional year of service, as described above.

There will be no impact on allocated vacation, personal time, emergency, and continuing education leave in the year in which the sabbatical is taken.

No tuition reimbursement will be given for courses taken during sabbatical leave.

### ***Requesting leave***

Human Resources will notify pastors nine (9) months prior to their eligibility for sabbatical leave. At least six (6) months prior to the anticipated commencement of sabbatical leave, the pastor must present their request and detailed plan for the sabbatical period. The plan must be presented to the Lead Pastor and the employee's direct supervisor before it is submitted to the Elders.

A request for sabbatical leave must include an outline of the purpose for the leave; a description of the anticipated benefits to both the requestor and the congregation; and a priorities and goals schedule. The requestor must also draft a schedule for reports to the elders and congregation prior to and upon return from leave.

The employee must identify a coach to be consulted periodically throughout the duration of the leave. It is highly recommended that the coach be involved in the creation of the detailed sabbatical leave plan. Payment for these services is to be made from the employee's expense account.

### ***Discharge of duties while on leave***

The pastor will be released from all duties during sabbatical, including pastoral and ministerial duties. Pastoral care to the congregation is not permitted during sabbatical leave.

Prior to the commencement of leave, the pastor will draft a plan for coverage of duties during the leave period and will disseminate the plan to impacted individuals. Subsequent responsibility for coverage of the employee's duties and responsibilities rests with Williamsburg Community Chapel rather than with the employee.

A single point of contact between Williamsburg Community Chapel and the employee will be designated for the duration of leave. A letter will be sent to the congregation announcing the sabbatical, explaining its purpose, and asking them to refrain from engaging in Chapel business with the employee during their leave.

### ***Return from leave***

The pastor must develop a reentry plan with their sabbatical coach, to be presented to their supervisor and Human Resources upon return from leave.

After the return from leave, the employee, their supervisor, and the Elders will consider the best course to be followed as the employee re-enters the life of the congregation. This may include an evaluation of job responsibilities, new opportunities, and adjustments to the employee's job description.

A written report of the sabbatical leave must be submitted to the Elders within two (2) months of the return from leave. At a minimum, the report must include lessons learned while on leave; activities which contributed to the success or lack thereof of the leave; and areas where the employee adhered to or deviated from the original sabbatical leave

plan. A report may be given to the congregation if it is determined to be of potential benefit.

The results of the sabbatical leave must be included in the employee's next performance review.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### **Interviews with the Hampton Roads Consortium Pastors (Conducted via Zoom)**

Ben LoPresti, 6/1/23.  
Craig Rush, 6/22/23.  
Chris Williams, 6/15/23  
Dan Hardesty, 5/25/23.  
Doug Bunn, 6/23/23.  
Garrett Spitz, 6/1/23.  
Robb Esperat, 7/20/23.

### **Other Sources**

Allen, Karen. "Mega Church Pastor Steps Down Amidst Misconduct Allegations." *ABC News*. April 11, 2018. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/pastor-church-attended-25000-steps-amid-misconduct-allegations>.

Allender, Dan B. *Leading with a Limp: Take Full Advantage of Your Most Powerful Weakness*. Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2006.

Alter, Robert. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. Vol. 3 of *The Writings*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2019.

Ambrose. *On the Duties of the Clergy*. Translated by Rev. H. De Romestrin. Oxford, UK: Benediction Classics, 2010.

Baron, Josh. "Merit or Inherit: How to Approach Succession in a Family Business." *Harvard Business Review*, September 12, 2022. <https://hbr.org/2022/09/merit-or-inherit-how-to-approach-succession-in-a-family-business>.

Barringer, Laura. "Willow Creek's Core Meeting: A Response." *Christianity Today*, June 2, 2021. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2021/june/willow-creeks-core-meeting-response.html>.

Beaumont, Susan. *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Inside the Large Congregation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

Beeley, Christopher A. *Leading God's People: Wisdom from the Early Church for Today*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2012.

Best Christian Workplaces. "Our Story." Last modified 2024.  
<https://workplaces.org/our-story>.

- Bolsinger, Tod. *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders Are Formed in the Crucible of Change*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020.
- Bower, Joseph L. *The CEO Within: Why Inside Outsiders Are the Key to Succession*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2007.
- Brown, Raymond. *The Message of Deuteronomy: A Theological Commentary*. The Bible Speaks Today, edited by J.A. Motyer. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Deuteronomy*. Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001.
- Castoro, Amy, and Fred Krawchuk. "Plan a Smooth Succession for Your Family Business." *Harvard Business Review*, September 21, 2022. <https://hbr.org/2022/09/plan-a-smooth-succession-for-your-family-business?autocomplete=true>.
- Centerpoint Community Church: 40 Years. [https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.cloversites.com/df/df82aea0-ea79-49a5-a8eb-860e2ce9185d/documents/CCC\\_40\\_year\\_history.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.cloversites.com/df/df82aea0-ea79-49a5-a8eb-860e2ce9185d/documents/CCC_40_year_history.pdf).
- Christensen, Duane L. *Word Biblical Commentary: Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12*. Vol. 6B of *Word Biblical Commentary*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002.
- Cicero. *De Officiis*. Translated by Walter Miller. New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1913.
- Clements, Ronald E. "Deuteronomy." In Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume 1*.
- Collins, Jim. *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*. London: Random House Business, 2001.
- Craigie, Peter C. *The Book of Deuteronomy*. New International Commentary on the Old Testament, edited by Robert L. Hubbard Jr. and Bill T. Arnold. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1976.
- Davidson, Ivor, ed. *Ambrose: De Officiis*. Vol. 1 of Oxford Early Christian Studies. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- DeYoung, Curtis Paul, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancy, and Karen Chai Kim. "All Churches Should Be Multi Racial: The Biblical Case." *Christianity Today*, April 1, 2005. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/april/22.33.html>.

- Forman, Rowland, Jeff Jones, and Bruce Miller. *The Leadership Baton: Intentional Strategy for Developing Leaders in Your Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004.
- Freedman, David Noel, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol. 1, A–C*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008.
- Freeman, Curtis W. “What Is Christian Leadership?” Lecture. *Christian Theology 904, Duke Divinity School*. August 15, 2022.
- Gelles, David. “How Jack Welch's Reign at G.E. Gave Us Elon Musk's Twitter Feed.” *New York Times*, May 21, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/21/business/jack-welch-ge-ceo-behavior.html>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Man Who Broke Capitalism: How Jack Welch Guttled the Heartland and Crushed the Soul of Corporate America—and How to Undo His Legacy*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2023.
- Goodstein, Laurie. “He’s a Superstar Pastor. She Worked for Him and Says He Groped Her Repeatedly.” *The New York Times*, August 5, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/05/us/bill-hybels-willow-creek-pat-baranowski.html>.
- Green, Joel B., ed. *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville, TN: Common English Bible, 2018.
- Gryboski, Michael. “Painful and Confusing’: John Piper's Successor Resigns from Lead Pastor Role at Bethlehem Baptist Church.” *The Christian Post*, July 20, 2021. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/john-pipers-successor-resigns-as-lead-pastor-at-bethlehem-baptist-church.html>.
- Hathaway, Joel. *Finding a Pastor: A Handbook for Ministerial Search Committees*. Lawrenceville, GA: PCA Committee on Discipleship Ministries, 2018.
- Hybels, Bill. “Opening Talk.” Presented at The Global Leadership Summit of the Willow Creek Association, South Barrington, IL, August 9, 2012.
- Jones, Rick. “PC(USA) Church Membership Still in Decline.” *Presbyterian Church (USA)*, May 1, 2023. <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2023/5/1/pcusa-church-membership-still-in-decline/>.
- Keck, Leander E., ed. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume 1*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume 6*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001.



- Khurana, Rakesh. *Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- Kim, Young Richard, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*. Cambridge Companions to Religion. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Kricher, Lee. *Seamless Pastoral Transition: 3 Imperatives—6 Pitfalls*. Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2022.
- Lafley, A.G, and Roger L. Martin. *Playing to Win: How Strategy Really Works*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013.
- Langford, Thomas A. *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*. Vol. 1. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998.
- Leonhardt, David. “The Jack Welch Effect.” *The New York Times*, June 5, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/05/briefing/jack-welch-david-gelles.html>.
- Longman, Tremper. *Jeremiah, Lamentations*. Understanding the Bible Commentary Series. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012.
- Matz, Brian J. *Gregory of Nazianzus*. Foundations of Theological Exegesis and Christian Spirituality. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016.
- McCormack, Brian Robert. “The Possible Church: Stores of Those Who Have Led White Congregations into a Multiethnic Reality.” D.Min thesis, Duke Divinity School, 2022.
- Metzger, Bruce M., and Roland E. Murphy, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Miller, Patrick D. *Deuteronomy*. Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990.
- Moon, Ruth. “Quitting Time: The Pope Retired. Should Your Pastor?” *Christianity Today*, March 12, 2013. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/april/quitting-time.html>.
- Mullins, Tom. *Passing the Leadership Baton: A Winning Transition Plan for Your Ministry*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2015.
- Norris, Richard A., trans. *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*. Writings from the Greco-Roman World. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012.

- O'Connor, Kathleen. "The Book of Lamentations: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." In Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume 6*.
- "On Calling a Pastor." *Presbyterian Church (USA) Church Leadership Connection*. Accessed November 15, 2022. [https://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/clc/pdfs/introduction\\_to\\_clc\\_powpoint\\_-\\_teach\\_the\\_teacher\\_resource.pdf](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/clc/pdfs/introduction_to_clc_powpoint_-_teach_the_teacher_resource.pdf).
- Perlow, Leslie A. and Jessica L. Porter. "Making Time Off Predictable and Required." *Harvard Business Review*, August 27, 2021. <https://hbr.org/2009/10/making-time-off-predictable-and-required>.
- Porter, Michael E. "What Is Strategy?" *Harvard Business Review*, April 4, 2023. <https://hbr.org/1996/11/what-is-strategy>.
- "Resources for Churches Seeking a Pastor." Administrative Committee PCA. Accessed November 3, 2022. <https://www.pcaac.org/pastor-search/churches-seeking-a-pastor/>.
- RNS Press Release Distribution. "Hundreds to Gather at 'Restore 2023' for Insight and Healing from Church Hurt." *Religion News Service*, September 18, 2023. <https://religionnews.com/2023/09/18/hundreds-to-gather-at-restore-2023-for-insight-and-healing-from-church-hurt/>.
- Rowe, C. Kavin. *Christianity's Surprise: A Sure and Certain Hope*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020.
- Schaff, Philip and Henry Wace, eds. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, Vol. 7: Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2022. Edited by Kevin Knight for *New Advent*. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310202.htm>
- Schaller, Lyle E. *The Very Large Church: New Rules for Leaders*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000.
- Schökel, Alonso Luis, and Guillermo Gutiérrez. *Moses: His Mission*. Middlegreen, UK: St Paul Publications, 1990.
- Smietana, Bob. "A Southern Baptist Leader Hid Decades of Abuse. Will His Fall Doom SBC Abuse Reforms?" *Religion News Service*, January 23, 2024. [https://religionnews.com/2024/01/22/a-southern-baptist-leader-used-religion-and-piety-to-mask-decades-of-abuse-will-his-fall-doom-sbc-abuse-reforms/?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=A+Southern+Baptist+leader+hid+decades+of+abuse.+Will+his+fall+doom+SBC+abuse+reforms%3F&utm\\_campaign=ni\\_newsletter](https://religionnews.com/2024/01/22/a-southern-baptist-leader-used-religion-and-piety-to-mask-decades-of-abuse-will-his-fall-doom-sbc-abuse-reforms/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=A+Southern+Baptist+leader+hid+decades+of+abuse.+Will+his+fall+doom+SBC+abuse+reforms%3F&utm_campaign=ni_newsletter).

- \_\_\_\_\_. “Willow Creek Cuts Staff Budget by \$6.5 Million.” *Christianity Today*, May 20, 2022. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/may/willow-creek-megachurch-staff-layoffs-covid-pandemic-attend.html>.
- Strawn, Brent A. *Honest to God Preaching: Talking Sin, Suffering, and Violence*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Old Testament: A Concise Introduction*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2020.
- Stubbs, David L. *Numbers*. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009.
- Thompson, Deanna A. *Deuteronomy*. Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.
- Vancil, Richard F. *Passing the Baton: Managing the Process of CEO Succession*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1988.
- Vanderbloemen, William. *Search: The Pastoral Search Committee Handbook*. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishing Group, 2016.
- Vanderbloemen, William, and Warren Bird. *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2020.
- Weese, Carolyn, and J. Russell Crabtree. *The Elephant in the Boardroom: Speaking the Unspoken about Pastoral Transitions*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2020.
- Willimon, William. *Don't Look Back: Methodist Hope for What Comes Next*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2022.
- Woods, Ted. *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*. Vol. 5 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, edited by David G. Firth. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011.
- Woodward, Dick. *Mini Bible College: Old Testament Handbook*. Hampton, VA: International Cooperating Ministries, 1995.
- Wright, Bryant, and Clay Smith. *Succession: Preparing Your Ministry for the Next Leader*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2022.

## BIOGRAPHY

M. Travis Simone currently serves as the lead pastor at the Williamsburg Community Chapel in Williamsburg, VA. In 2003, he graduated from the College of William and Mary where he concentrated in Religion. He attended seminary at Emory University's Candler School of Theology and received the Master of Divinity degree in 2008.

Travis is the third long-tenured pastor at the Chapel. Along with a talented staff and team of pastors, he is grateful for the opportunity to steward a strong culture of getting people into God's Word, meeting people wherever they are, making community our middle name, and joining in one common disciple-making effort. He is a co-author of the *Conversations in Justice* small group curriculum and serves on the Committee for Young Life's Old Dominion Region.

Travis grew up in Virginia Beach, Virginia, where he met his wife, Nina, in kindergarten. They have four children: Sophia, Olivia, Leila, and Ruthie. If the Simones have the chance to go anywhere together, they always choose the beach. In his spare time, Travis listens to baseball on the radio, rides his bike, paddle boards, and cheers for the William and Mary Tribe. He is on a permanent quest for the perfect Italian sandwich.