

lead on

Resourcing your ministry, leader to leader

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succession planning

by John Fisher

I confess to being worried by succession planning. On the one hand, giving thought to who, or what, comes next when you move on from a role sounds like sensible planning. On the other hand, it has the vague whiff of manipulation and the worst forms of exercising power and control. This article is about the former, but with a gentle disclaimer reminding us that God is ultimately in control and everything we do should be about his plans and not our own motives.

Succession planning is actually a good thing. How many times have we heard of a church fellowship, or project, that effectively collapsed because someone moved on and little thought was given to handing over well? See if you can recall such an example from your own experience. A smooth succession can be the difference between success and failure. At the very least bad succession planning sets the work of the church back and means much energy is expended in regaining lost momentum. This creates disillusion, cynicism and drift, particularly if the cycle is repeated. So, what can we do to succeed well?

Here are some golden nuggets of what to do. If we plan to hand on in a positive fashion that creates hope, energy and purpose, that can only be good for the kingdom. To do this encourages

vision, achieves goals, and gives the church direction. Succession planning is an essential part of a leader's work.

Plan well

Change seems to take many people by surprise. Someone hands in notice unexpectedly, or events dictate a change is made, and we grumble because it is unwelcome and intrudes. Much of this pain can be offset by having a good vision and strategy in place. Then when change happens, or is forced upon us, it occurs within the bigger picture of a church plan. If everyone knows this plan there will be energy and focus to deal with problems and manage change. Being clear about how a group, or person, fits into the leadership of a church brings clarity for the future and certainty of expectation for anyone who moves into a new position. Plan well and make these plans known.

Be prepared

This point is slightly different to planning. Preparation means that individual leaders need to be clear about their roles and purpose. Having clear, simple and written role descriptions, terms of office and lines of accountability for leaders gives much clarity about function. It means that when succession is thought about there is an idea of the skills needed to do a job, how much time it will take, and who can support and advise if necessary.



For example a new children's group leader will need to know the jobs that need doing, the leaders' meetings to attend, where to go if there are safeguarding issues, and how to recruit new helpers safely. If they understand all this it will help them to be an effective leader and they are more likely to be enthusiastic for the job. All this takes preparation and hard work behind the scenes, but it pays dividends.

Nurture skills and gifts

Skills and gifts don't just emerge by magic. Competency and ability can be nurtured and this is where training comes in. Leaders need to understand that part of succession is the nurture of talents in others and training is an important part of this process. Having regular, intentional and quality training encourages good practice and creates a greater pool of trusted people from which a church can draw at times of change. To neglect training is to constrict resources and hold back the character development of the church collectively. Wise leadership sets a tone of ongoing training, invites uptake and creates a climate of learning and service.

Communicate well

Communication is really important. For example when a vicar moves on it is important that they give some thought to answering well the question that will come – why? Having thought about it and giving a positive answer will help those that are left behind see the change in context and not leave them floundering. When groups change it is important to consult and communicate well to avoid misunderstanding and conflict growing. Much attention needs to be given to communication whether by word, written form or formal meetings. When change happens, explaining why and what next is crucial to good succession.

Be supportive

Succession means that someone follows. The implications can be significant and therefore proper pastoral care and support must be in place for that person. It may be necessary for a vicar who is leaving to organise some special

sessions with the churchwardens to help them plan for the vacancy and understand who can support them. In any change there will be significant people who need extra time and special attention. Think about these people and plan for this support.

Be positive

I don't like change. It is not something I welcome, or have natural affinity to, for reasons of personality. However, I have learnt that change is fairly constant (pardon the pun) and can be a very good thing (it can be difficult and painful of course and this needs special care). It brings renewal, fresh ideas and inspiration, and good change breeds vitality. For leaders and succession planning it is helpful to see change as a positive thing and part of the natural order and therefore to expect it and plan for it. Be positive, be optimistic and remember that God is in control.

Be prayerful

We are Christians. It is obvious, but one of the ways that Christian leadership should be distinct from secular models is in the Christ-like perspective we bring to our work. Thanking people for service and commissioning new people in the context of prayer and worship is important. Plan to make this happen and do it well because it will have a positive impact on those giving up and those following.

Review regularly

Finally, it is very significant to review well and set end times. Many jobs in church life have terms of office now and it is easier to be organised and plan for succession when you know an end time. For posts which are not time limited it is still important to review regularly and ask the question; 'Is it appropriate for a leader to continue?' Done pastorally and sensitively this sort of review will give the main leader a really good feel for when change might be coming and help set a plan to deal with it.

For reflection

- What is your succession plan for when you move on from your role?
- Who might it be helpful to talk to about this now? What might you need to put in place?
- Not for the faint hearted ... if you were removed from your role next week through accident or injury, what could you put in place that would help those handling a crisis situation?

