



Leadership transitions are very important and usually challenging. Church leaders often find themselves navigating these transitions with too little information, not enough experience, and no one to guide them along the path. This quick guide is intended to help church leaders start the conversation about their lead pastor transition with good information, recommended resources, and a sense of who to turn to for guidance along the journey.

Preliminary Considerations

- You will bless the congregation by leading them through the transition based on principle rather than expediency.
- Slow yourselves and the congregation down!
- Work a principled process without shortcutting.
- The congregation needs to be attentive to Jesus, leveraging this teachable moment.

Church Assessment

- Prayerfully collaborate to get a clear picture of where you have been as a church, who you are now, and where you are going in the future.
- Use a proven assessment tool to help clarify these things. Examples are the [Natural Church Development](#) survey, the [Holy Cow! Consulting](#) (they have a specialized assessment for smaller congregations) and [Rural Home Mission Church Health Assessment](#).
- Apply the findings of the assessment to the search process by producing several written documents: the EFCA Pastor Search profile, a church profile, a simple job description, and clear compensation/benefits range.

Transition Wisdom and Best Practices

- Transitions happen best with input from trusted District leaders and trusted partners. Don't go it alone; make sure to seek outside perspectives and assistance.
- It is best to be candid about the nature of your transition. This transition could be natural, healthy, and anticipated. It may be unexpected, difficult, or contentious.
- It is crucial to clarify the departing pastor's role during the transition and beyond.
- Internal candidates (staff or lay leaders) should almost always be assessed early in the process.
- While convenient, it is unwise to use existing staff as long-term pulpit supply. This can become polarizing as they will likely be seen as the default candidate, and often end up needing to leave the staff. While it may seem prudent and expedient, we suggest you NEVER do this.
- We recommend you do not use potential candidates as pulpit supply during the transition.
- You should work to ensure good chemistry and limit personal agendas within your search team. This is not a team that represents the individual interest groups, but rather a group of people who will consider what is best for the church as a whole.
- During your transition, you should work to resolve conflict within your church leadership team. In our experience, this often includes additional staff and board transitions.
- Be patient and resist the temptation to rush, take the first candidate you find, or settle for who is currently available.
- The leadership team (church board and staff) must pace themselves during the transition. A typical lead pastor transition will last 12-18 months (marathons, not sprints).
- It is tempting to think your church can save money during the transition. Please remember that fruitful pastoral searches cost money.

ESSENTIAL STEPS IN PASTORAL TRANSITION



- Church leaders, both lay and vocational, often feel the urge during a time of transition to promote ministry initiatives they felt have been neglected under the previous pastor. While well intentioned, this often causes significant conflict, creates confusion and generally hurts the chances of a church advancing in the area that is being promoted.
- Answers on paper only tell part of the story. When considering candidates we strongly encourage search teams to have personal interviews with a number of candidates. Each interview is a opportunity to learn more about a candidate, as well as to refine what the church is looking for in the next pastor. Interviews may prompt you to think of other traits and skills which you had not considered. We also encourage teams to bring in potential candidates for a “soft visit” prior to a candidating weekend. This allows a great opportunity for the candidate and their spouse to get to see the church and the community without the busyness that comes with a more formal visit. It also allows the search team and church leadership team a more relaxed opportunity to get to know the candidate.
- Try not to draw the circle to small. There are many excellent potential pastors who get overlooked because they don’t fit the ideal picture the church or search team has created. They could be older or younger, single or widowed, or just have a slightly different view of minor issues related to doctrine or practice (major on majors, minor on minors). Take the time to discuss and clarify rather than just eliminating the candidate.

Recommended Resources

- Next: Pastoral Succession that Works by William VanderBloemen and Warren Bird
- Help—We Just Lost Our Pastor by Ken Mohberg
- Before You Move: A Guide to Making Transitions in Ministry by John Cionca
- The Elephant in the Boardroom: Speaking the Unspoken about Pastoral Transitions by Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree

The NPD is eager to serve you in your lead pastor transition!

- We are available to meet with your leaders during all phases of this process. We suggest:
 1. An initial meeting shortly after the transition has begun and before the current pastor leaves
 2. After a search team is formed
 3. Before you seek candidates.
- We are committed to serving your outgoing lead pastor as well.
- We can help you find proven interim pastors to serve and guide you through this transition. [Interim Pastor Ministries](#) has served many EFCA churches during pastoral transitions.
- When the time comes, we would love to recommend candidates we believe will fit your church. Helpful tools include: [EFCA Pastor Search](#) and [EFCA Job Board](#). We can also assist in posting your profile at schools like Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS), Moody Bible Institute, University of Northwestern, and Oak Hills.
- If you need more support than we can provide, we know and recommend effective, trustworthy consulting groups who specialize in helping churches find leaders.

Please reach out to us with any questions or requests. The Northern Plains District is here to help your church through a healthy and successful time of transition.

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