

# TRANSITION TIMES

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## HOW CHURCHES NAVIGATE PASTORAL CHANGE—AND STAY HEALTHY

A Book Review By Mike Ramey

**“Leadership Transitions: How Churches Navigate Pastoral Change—and Stay Healthy,” A Barna Report. c. 2019 by Barna Group.**

**“Leadership change, in particular represents a critical intersection of the old and new, the past and future which, while exciting for some, is unsettling for many” (p. 5).**

This brand new Barna Report looks at the transitions of (particularly) senior pastors and considers the effects of such transitions in the various stages of the process. The research focused on planned transitions (all leaders), planned transitions (pastor only), and forced transitions; and what takes place before, during, and after the transitions.

In the Introduction, we are given insight as to the initial conclusions of this study: “All things considered, pastoral succession is one of the most pressing issues in the Church today. How a church navigates a leadership transition impacts its ability to be effective on every other front: caring for those in need, providing theological instruction, confronting injustice, cultivating deep community, facilitating meaningful worship experiences and, ultimately, drawing people to know and follow Christ. An unsuccessful or messy pastoral succession process can compromise these mission-critical efforts. On the other hand, a positive process of transition can propel a church into a new season of fruitfulness” (p. 10).

The Methodology of this study (p. 107) explains that the research is “based on surveys of pastors, church staff, and churchgoing Christians.” Raw numbers are 249

“incoming” pastors, 70 “outgoing” pastors, 129 staff members, and 1,517 church-going members (age 18 and older). All these respondents had experienced a transition in the previous years of the study.

The primary thrust of the research is to show the benefit of prior planning for pastoral transitions. Much of the research deals with examining what happens when pastors and churches set up succession plans for transition—primarily, when the Senior Pastor either (a) retires, (b) steps down as the lead pastor, or (c) cannot continue his duties. The difference in planning is also examined; i.e., when the church’s leaders and pastor plan as compared with the pastor only planning (e.g., retirement). The idea of “forced transitions” refers to the matter of a pastor being removed from office and the resulting trauma to the congregation.

The primary sections deal with “Before the Transition,” “During the Transition,” and “After the Transition,” with Q&A interviews. At the end of each of these sections, there is a “Field Guide” that helps a “team take the information and start thinking about what it means for your unique context” (p. 14). Each Field Guide has four parts: Team Assessment questions, Reflection Questions, Activities and Actions, and a Focus on the Players. These “Field Guides” are provided as “a useful tool as you and your team work toward and through transitions, both now and in the future” (p. 15).

Here are a few notable quotations:

- “When a transition is planned in advance, more than half of outgoing pastors stick around, whether they step back to continue on staff or withdraw to a lay role” (p. 21).
- “As a general rule, the higher the degree of congreg-

-ants' involvement, the more positive they feel about the final outcome. Eight out of 10 churchgoers with positive comments agree that 'the congregation had a high degree of input in the succession process' (81%), compared to six in 10 with mixed (61%) and half of those with negative comments (53%)" (p. 24).

- Communication is one of the strongest drivers of a successful succession and, overall, forced-transition churchgoers believe their church leadership was effective in communicating the succession process....However, it's in the area of communication that leaders in forced transitions have the largest gap to close with their counterparts from planned or pastor-initiated transition churches. ... [I]f managed properly and gracefully, forced transitions can result in healthy outcomes for a congregation" (pp. 31-32).
- "A perception of church unity and consistent, two-way communication are more significant in determining positive outcome than a church's priorities, yet priorities *do* have a significant role to play in how well a transition goes and feels to those who experience it. Churches that focus on the big picture – vision and/or church unity – tend to have better transitions than those that focus on growth or finances" (p. 47).
- "Group unity goes wrong when information is limited. ...Group unity goes wrong when people's opinions became labels of identity, as in "Oh, he's hard-headed" or "She's one of the complainers."...Group unity goes wrong when misinformation and rumors have not been dealt with properly and openly" (pp. 53-54).
- "Communicating about voluntary transitions, such as a pastoral retirement or succession, typically involves ... the congregation's desire for transparency, the desire for the church to control the flow of information, the incoming pastor, and the outgoing pastor" (p. 61).
- "People will walk through a really long tunnel if they know how long the tunnel is" (p. 63).
- "Times of transition have a way of humanizing spiritual leaders... . Moses led his people through the Red Sea, then ended his life in an anticlimactic moment, alone on a mountain, not getting to go into the Promised Land. We think, wait, what just happened? He just dies. But the ministry keeps going" (p. 75).

In a section titled, "5 Marks of Successful Leadership Transition," David Kinnaman, the president of the Barna Group, lists the five top factors associated with successful leadership transitions: (1) Communicate clearly, honestly and often, (2) Target unity, (3) If you can, plan, (4) Aim for a graceful exit, and (5) Keep asking *Why*.

While the goal of this research seems aimed at convincing pastors and churches to plan for succession, there is great data that will be useful for interim pastors. I bought the book out of curiosity; I will be using its insights for interim ministry and I recommend it.

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### LuTMA Basic Education Training

#### Determined and Prospective

Name	Phase	Month	Dates	Location
Luther	Phase 1	October 2019	Oct 14-18	St. Paul, MN
<b>2020</b>				
Livermore	Phase 1	February 2020	Feb 3-7	Livermore CA
NEOS	Phase 1	March 2020	Mar 16-20	Stow OH
Concordia	Phase 1	April 2020	Apr 20-24	St. Louis MO
PSD	Phase 1	Sept 2019	Sept 21-25	TBD
Luther	Phase 3	April 2020	Apr 20-24	Farmington MN
Texas	Phase 1	TBD	TBD	TBD
Livermore	Phase 3	August 2020	Aug 17-21	Livermore, CA
Concordia	Phase 3	Oct-20	Oct 19-23	St. Louis
Texas	Phase 3	TBD	TBD	TBD
Luther	Phase 1	Oct 2020? TBD	TBD	TBD
NEOS	Phase 3	Nov-20	Nov 9-13	Stow OH
<b>2021</b>				
Luther	Phase 3	April 2021? TBD	TBD	TBD
PSD	Phase 3	April 2021	April 19-23	TBD