

Lead Pastor Transitions



A Quick Guide from the North Central District

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 and the *Holy Cow! Consulting* 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.
- 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.



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 NCD 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) initial meeting (2) one after a search team is formed, and (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.
- When the time comes, we would love to recommend candidates we believe will fit your church.
- If you need more support than we can provide, we know and recommend effective, trustworthy consulting groups who specialize in helping churches find leaders.