

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

A conversation guide for church leaders

Do Pastors and Church Leaders Have “Best Used By” Dates?

This is not a rhetorical question. Because a good portion of my work is with churches in lead pastor and leadership transition, I am asked some form of this question on a regular basis. Do pastors and church leaders have a “best used by” date? The answer is “yes.” The answer is also “no,” which is why that’s something to talk about.

The answer is “yes” because everyone reaches a peak level of performance effectiveness sometime in their work life and physical capacities. Once that peak performance level is reached, performance eventually begins to decline – that’s why it is a peak.

The answer is also “no” because church pastors and leaders exercise a wide array of skills and those skills do not peak at the same time. The answer is a resounding “no” when one asks if the “best used by” date is a specific age. “Best used by” is an assessment of performance potential in important aspects of the role one plays, not a stereotypical specific age.

I regularly work with churches in pastoral transition that have become “older” – meaning that those attending are middle aged or older and the church has failed to attract and engage the succeeding generations. When the discussion comes to the characteristics of the pastor they are looking for, invariably they say they need a pastor that is 35-40 years old, experienced, a great teacher, married with 2.5 children, and – well, you get the drift.

But this is seldom true. That may be the characteristics of the generation they need to attract and engage if they don’t want to eventually close the church, but it may not be the pastor they need. What they probably need is an experienced pastor in his 50’s or 60’s that can shepherd them, rather than just teach Bible to them, to get their minds and hearts *and behaviors* aligned with the Great Commission. A high-energy pastor in his 30s, based on lots of anecdotal evidence, likely won’t be able to accomplish the task and they often become an unintentional interim. Leaders need to lead the church from where they are to where they need to be.

I have found the same thing to be true of church board members and leadership teams. At some time in their lives, performance begins to decline, and we get to a point where we need to step aside – but we don’t. Others seem to know when that time is before we do. That’s

probably why so many athletes try to work one or two years past their “best used by date” and fans can’t help but remember them for their last, rather pitiful seasons.

So how does a leader determine whether they are approaching or beyond their best used by date? Here are some ideas for having your conversation.

- Proverbs 20:29 is one of my favorite verses during this season of my life (yes, I’m older...). *“The glory of young men is their strength, gray hair the splendor of the old.”* It is a fact of life that strength ebbs and wisdom increases as we journey through the years of our lives. Granted, some people don’t seem to get appreciably wiser over time, but they generally are found out quickly and do not serve long as pastors and church leaders. We all find that our strength ebbs.

Consider discussing the implications of this proverb with your leadership team. How does this truth play out in real life and how is it playing out in our church? What areas should an older leader pass on to younger leaders, and what unique contributions to the church can older leaders provide? How does one leverage the transition from strength to wisdom? Do we have leaders in diverse stages of life? If not, how might we develop and deploy them?

- Whether you are a younger leader, an older leader, or trying to figure out where the middle of the continuum is, a great question to ask is, “How can I best serve this church using the skills and gifts that I have in this season of my life?” An older pastor/leader will likely not culturally resonate as well with significantly younger congregants as might a pastor closer to their age; but they can establish solid, Christ-honoring relationships with them akin to a beloved favorite uncle or father figure. A younger leader may, due to high energy and lack of seasoned wisdom, run right past or through the older adults in the congregation, forgetting that he/she is their pastor, too. As shepherds we need to lead and care for all the flock, not just our favorite parts. Ask others on your team, “How can I best serve this church using the skills and gifts that I have in this season of my life?” and reflect on those responses.
- When is it time for an older pastor to retire? Unfortunately for many Baby Boomer generation pastors, the answer to this question is “never” because they have never saved for retirement. Sadly, some churches are faced with the difficult choice of firing a beloved, long-term pastor that no longer leads or teaches effectively and cannot lead the church into the next season of its life even though he cannot afford to live off his likely retirement income or let him remain and eventually snuff the life out of the church. Sounds dramatic, but it is sadly sometimes true.

How are we preparing paid leaders to retire? Do they have retirement funds? Do we contribute via payroll process to a retirement fund? If you don’t, start one now. Don’t let a paid leader say he or she will never retire. Maybe they won’t stop doing some form of ministry, but their employment at their current church in their current job will. Prepare for it.

- Lastly, a more personal and difficult question is, “Should I step aside?” I suggest for pastors and church leaders to strongly consider retiring or stepping aside from their leadership role when things like these are occurring:
 - I no longer have enough energy (physical, emotional, spiritually) to do the work required.
 - The church is in long-term or significant decline, and I have no real vision or strategy for its future.
 - The church is plateaued, and I am biding my time until I can retire.
 - Succeeding generations don’t come and I don’t relate to them (even more so if the succeeding generation bugs you).
 - My zeal to minister to lost people has waned.
 - I’ve been leading for a long time and just cannot see letting go or stepping aside. Pastor or elder has become my identity, not my role.
 - As a board member, I’m more attracted to the relationships we have than doing the hard work of leadership.

I do not suggest that leaders need to step aside the moment they fall below their peak effectiveness, whatever level that may be. Nor should they step aside at a specific age. Yet, it is also important that we do not hold our churches hostage and risk their future by clinging to our posts when we are no longer effective and risk causing harm. Whether we are approaching, at, or beyond our “best used by date” is something to talk about. It may be a tough conversation, but it is an important one. We lead as those that will give an account. I want Jesus to tell me I did well and didn’t hang on too long. Someone please tell me when it’s time for me to change lanes in my service in the ministry of leadership in the church. It’s hard to stop doing what you love, but it’s destructive to stay too long. That’s why wisdom is so important for us gray hairs.

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.
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This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders’ conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.

Prior articles can be found at <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/something-to-talk-about-archives/>