

The Pastoral Succession Crisis Is Only Getting More Complicated



Barna research suggests that many older pastors are doing a pretty good job of preparing themselves for the finish line.

Unfortunately, our research from The Resilient Pastor series also suggests that churches are struggling to set up a new generation for leadership as the older one prepares to step aside, something we'll explore further in this article.

Most Clergy Agree It's Getting Harder to Find Young Christians Who Want to Become Pastors

In Barna's 2017 report on The State of Pastors, we explored the "greying of the clergy"—confirming that most U.S. pastors are in the later stages of life and career.

This pattern persists: As of 2022, only 16 percent of Protestant senior pastors are 40 years old or younger, and the average age among pastors is 52. As a generation of clergy ages and prepares to step down, it is not clear that churches are prepared for the transition. If this trend goes unaddressed, the Church in the U.S. will face a real succession crisis. Further, considering that younger pastors are already struggling with burnout at higher rates than their older colleagues are, the crisis is compounded and accelerating.

This may not come as a surprise. Barna's data indicates that most pastors are worried about the future of pastoring. Three-quarters of pastors surveyed say they at least somewhat agree with the statement "It is becoming harder to find mature young Christians who want to be pastors," and 71 percent at least somewhat agree with the statement "I am concerned about the quality of future Christian leaders."



"IT IS BECOMING HARDER TO FIND MATURE YOUNG CHRISTIANS WHO WANT TO BECOME PASTORS"

● Agree strongly ● Agree somewhat ● Disagree somewhat ● Disagree strongly ● Don't know

2015



2022



Source: Barna Group

n=386 U.S. Protestant senior pastors, April–December 2015; n=584 U.S. Protestant senior pastors, September 6–16, 2022.



"I AM CONCERNED ABOUT THE QUALITY OF FUTURE CHRISTIAN LEADERS"

● Agree strongly ● Agree somewhat ● Disagree somewhat ● Disagree strongly ● Don't know

2022



Source: Barna Group

n=584 U.S. Protestant senior pastors, September 6–16, 2022.

These are all seemingly problems of the future—and like all such problems, it's tempting to deal with them another day. Unfortunately, the data suggest the Church doesn't have much time. The average pastor says they're about 17 years from when they'd ideally like to retire, and one-quarter of pastors is hoping to retire within the next seven years.

Compared to 2015, Churches Today Are Less Likely to Prioritize Developing Future Leaders

In Barna's Leadership Transitions report, we found that a successful transition depends on multiple factors like transparent communication, staff harmony and a sense of unity between the leadership and the congregation. "Evidence of good communication, especially between a church's leadership and congregation, is the single biggest factor in a smooth leadership transition—and the inverse is often true as well," says Barna Group CEO David Kinnaman. "We see over and over that the best emotions, decisions and outcomes of a leadership transition are associated with churches that communicate well throughout the process."

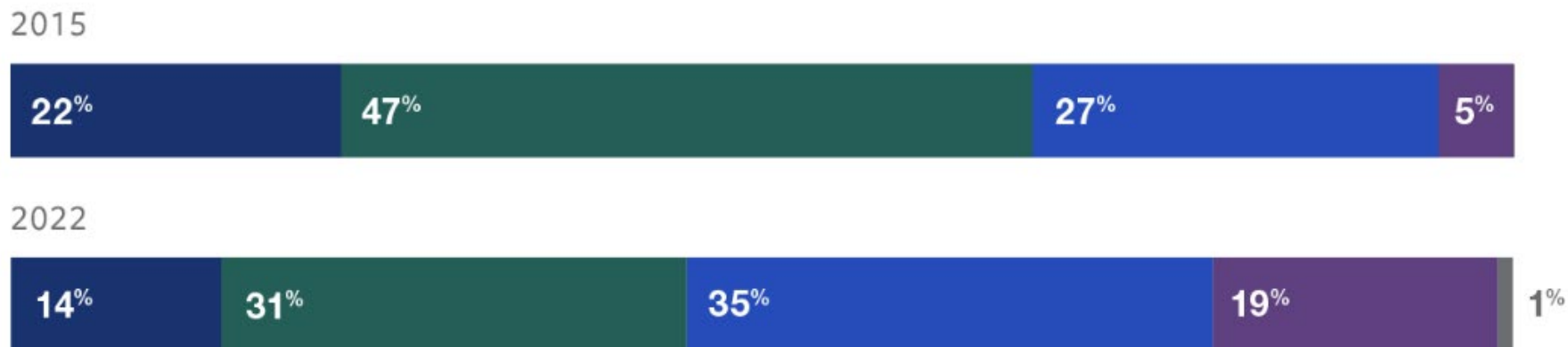
Clearly defined, well-communicated transition plans and team unity take time and resources, which might explain why many churches struggle to implement them effectively. More than half of pastors (54%) disagree with the statement "my church puts a significant priority on training and developing the next generation of leaders"—

a 22 percent increase since 2015. Four in five pastors (79%) agree that “churches aren’t rising to their responsibilities to train up the next generation of Christian leaders.” In short, one reason the next generation of Christians is unprepared for the challenges of leading a church may be that so few churches are preparing them.

"MY CHURCH PUTS A SIGNIFICANT PRIORITY ON TRAINING AND DEVELOPING THE NEXT GENERATION OF CHURCH LEADERS"



● Agree strongly ● Agree somewhat ● Disagree somewhat ● Disagree strongly ● Don't know



Source: Barna Group

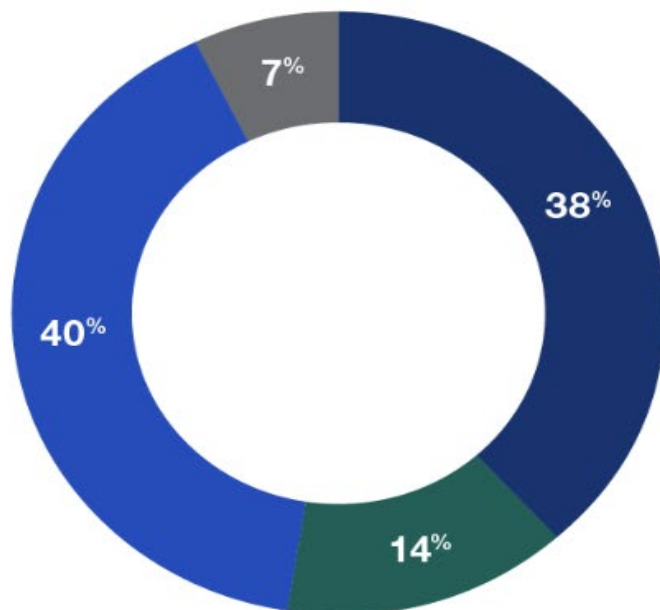
n=388 U.S. Protestant senior pastors, April–December 2015; n=584 U.S. Protestant senior pastors, September 6–16, 2022.

Now, we don't want to be too hard on the churches that have neglected to train the next generation of pastors. It's not as if pastors don't want to take time to train future leaders of the Church; only 7 percent of pastors surveyed say developing a leadership

pipeline isn't a high personal priority. But pastors have a lot going on, and it's very easy to prioritize the urgent over the truly important. While 38 percent of pastors say that developing a leadership pipeline is a "top personal priority," 40 percent say they've thought about the need but just "have too many other ministry concerns."

Meanwhile, 14 percent of pastors say they've delegated the job to others.

AS SENIOR PASTOR, HOW HIGHLY DO YOU PRIORITIZE DEVELOPING A LEADERSHIP PIPELINE WITHIN YOUR CONGREGATION?



- I make it a top personal priority
- I delegate leadership development to other staff / team members
- I have thought about the need, but have too many other ministry concerns
- It is not a high priority for me

Source: Barna Group
n=584 U.S. Protestant senior pastors, September 6-16, 2022.

In short, while most pastors agree that developing a solid succession plan is important, not every pastor feels like they have the time to do anything about it.

Right now, the future of Christian leadership in the U.S. is unclear. Passing the baton will take more effort than we are currently seeing from most churches. It's essential that their plans stem not only from a desire to honor seasoned departing leaders, but also from an informed understanding of the emerging generation and a proactive vision to produce resilient pastors.

Barna data has shown that these baton-passing moments can be a negative or mixed experience for churchgoers. But when you lead with an eventual transition in mind, you can prime your church for a healthy, impactful future. That's why we've teamed up with Glenn Packiam, Rich Villodas and Tara Beth Leach to host a free webinar called "The Succession Plan: Why Every Pastor Needs One (And 3 Ways You Can Start One Today)."

This webinar takes place on September 20, at 1PM ET. Register [here](#) and join us to explore more data and hear expert insights that will help you strengthen the succession plan at your church.

About the Research

2015 data: Barna conducted 901 interviews with Protestant senior pastors in the U.S. between April and December 2015. The interviews were conducted through a mix of online and phone. Quotas were set to ensure representation by denomination, church size and region. Minimal statistical weighting was applied to maximize representation and the margin of error is +/- 3.1% at the 95% confidence level.

2022 data: Barna conducted 585 online interviews with Protestant senior pastors in the U.S. from September 6–16, 2022. Quotas were set to ensure representation by denomination, church size and region and oversampling was conducted to reach female senior pastors. Minimal statistical weighting was applied to maximize representation and the sample error is +/- 3.8% at the 95% confidence level.

Photo by Braden Collum on Unsplash

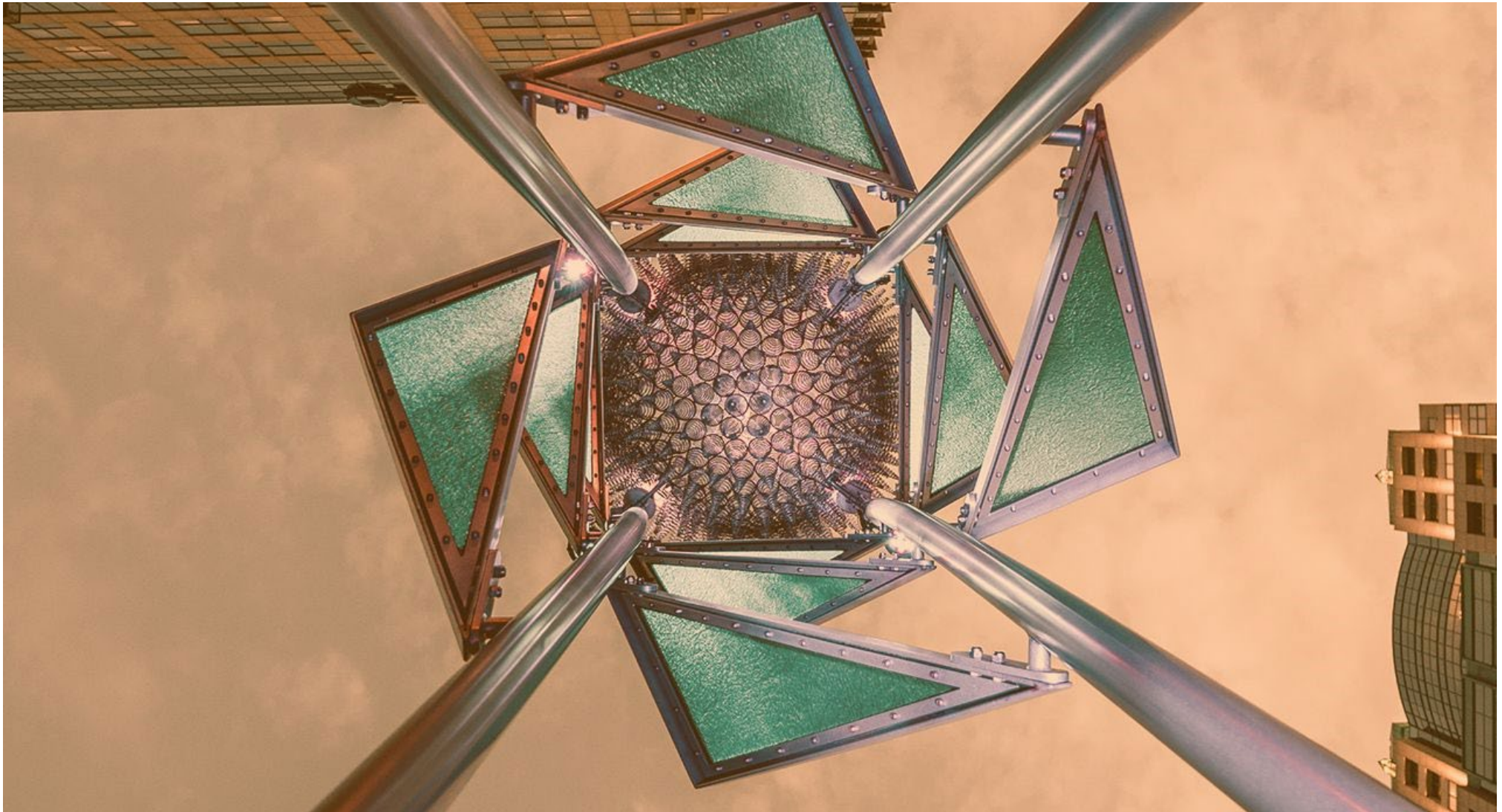
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The Key to Creating Guidelines for Your Succession

by Sam Chand

Core Values Oct 30, 2023



A church's core values are like the ballast in a ship. Although storms may buffet a vessel above the waterline, it is the weight of the ballast in the hull of the ship, beneath the waterline, that allows it to weather the storm and reach its destination safely. Likewise, when a church faces crisis, it is the shared values of the congregation—defined, taught, and embraced in times of calm—that sustain it through the storms of transition.

The values of our organizations reflect the importance we attach to something that serves as an influence and a guide for transitioning team members' behavior. Some churches have well-defined and explained core values, but many don't. If the "head" of an organization is its vision and the "heart" of an organization is its mission, the "soul" of an organization is its values. The values of an organization can often be described with the following metaphors:

1. **Glue:** Values hold an organization together. When there is a discrepancy, alignment and a solution can be settled by reviewing the core values.
2. **A Foundation:** Values provide stability for growth. The ultimate groundwork is that of morality, as noted in Proverbs 16:11 (MSG): "Good leaders abhor wrongdoings of all kinds; sound leadership has a moral foundation."

3. **A Yardstick:** Values set the standard for the transition team's behavior. We all know that what is measured is what gets attention, so clear expectations set the standard.
4. **A Compass:** Values give direction and guidance. This can come in a variety of contexts, but values provide a clear path forward.
5. **A Magnet:** Values attract good team members. Having the right people on the team is invaluable. How do you attract team members that promote the mission of the church? By having well-defined core values that they can identify with.
6. **An Identity:** Values define and identify the team. This identity takes place when values align with behavior. Values without aligned behavior equals energy drain and ineffectiveness. Values with aligned behavior will produce energy bursts and effectiveness.

We all live by core values, whether we are aware of it or not. Organizational core values need to be identified and cultivated in the life of the church. These values not only guide the congregation and transitioning team's approach to ministry, but they also are key to attracting the right new leadership in times of transition. When core values are clearly expressed and practiced, they serve as a filter for identifying—and eliminating—candidates.

Succession Planning Is NOT Leadership Development (But It Is One Result)

Leaders sometimes equate succession planning with leadership development and even speak of them interchangeably. They are both important, but they are not the same.

Don't confuse succession with leadership development. Succession is not leadership development, but it is one result of leadership development. If leadership development is the root, wise succession planning is one of the fruits. If you focus on leadership development, you will get succession. However, it is possible to focus on succession and miss leadership development. Practically, it is best to think of leadership development as the overarching term and succession planning as underneath the umbrella of leadership development. Two big thoughts on the relationship between leadership development and succession planning:

1. Succession planning REFLECTS the health of your leadership development culture.

If a ministry or organization has a healthy leadership development culture, succession planning is the beautiful result. Not only for senior leadership roles, but for all roles. Leaders are being created. When new opportunities arise or there are open positions, people on the team are considered or pursued for those roles. Where there is no intentional plan or process to develop leaders, there are also typically no conversations or plans for succession.

2. Succession planning can help DIRECT your leadership development culture.

Because succession is a fruit of leadership development, the realization that the fruit of succession is needed can cause people to focus on the root of leadership development. The realization that all roles will

someday be filled by someone else should highlight the need for development. The reality that all leaders are interim leaders should increase our desire to develop others. Opportunities will come our way; new leaders will be needed. The world is broken and filled with pain; new leaders will be needed to serve others. The world is broken and leaders will fall; new leaders will be needed. Realizing there will be a need for future leaders can help spur the important thinking to care for and develop the people on the team.

While not the same, they are related. Ram Charan says most leadership initiatives fail because people are trained for current jobs—not future jobs. So, when leadership development trains people for future roles, succession planning gets a win too.