

PASSING THE BATON

By: Wayne Hoag

An Introduction

In May of 2013, while attending Bayside Church's Thrive Conference in Granite Bay, CA, I attended an afternoon workshop. The topic of that workshop was Pastoral Succession. One of the topics of discussion was the difficulty of pastoral transition that often occurs following the long tenure of a Senior Pastor. At that point I had been the senior pastor of Sierra Bible Church in Truckee, CA for twenty-two years. Following the workshop, I began to ask myself the question, "What would be the best transition for Sierra Bible Church when my time as its senior pastor comes to an end?"

Later that summer I was enjoying a spectacular August morning in the high desert region of Southeastern Utah, and I was seeing it in a way that made it seem even more spectacular, from the saddle of my Harley Davidson Road King motorcycle. As I came into the outskirts of the city of Moab, I felt compelled to take a short detour up South Arroyo Road, a road which I had traveled hundreds of times since the summer of 1978. At the end of the road stood a large, white brick church building, at which I stopped and

dismounted. As I removed my gloves and helmet, a wave of unexpected emotion swept through me.

From the summer of 1978 until the summer of 1991, I had been the senior pastor of the congregation that occupied this building, the Moab Christian Center. When I moved on from Moab in 1991, the Christian Center was a thriving congregation of over 200 members. The ministry also included a K-8th grade Christian school, The Moab Christian Academy. The church building occupied half of a five-acre parcel of land, and two hundred feet behind it stood the school building. All of it was bought and paid for, the ministry was free from any financial debt.

And now, twenty-two years later, following a couple of church splits, the once thriving congregation, had dwindled to around 20 members. The Moab Christian Academy had also closed its doors and the school building was now falling into disrepair. Weeds had overtaken the expanse between the buildings as well as the large fenced in playground that surrounded the school. As I walked around the property, I wept for what once had been, I wept for what this ministry had now become.

As I walked and wept and prayed, the Holy Spirit began to speak to my heart, revealing the part that I had played in the demise of this once

flourishing ministry. During my years as Christian Center's pastor, I dutifully preached and taught the congregation from God's Word and watched it grow from a handful to a thriving body of believers. I had loved and served this congregation with my whole heart, but what I failed to do was to mentor and raise up men who could lead this church beyond my tenure. Therefore, when I moved on, the church, in their haste to fill the vacant pulpit, hired the first candidate that accepted their call. The church was also led in a direction that was theologically opposite of my leading and teaching. The result? Within a year the church went through an ugly split. The scenario then repeated itself within the next two years.

On that August morning, with the pastoral transition workshop still fresh in my memory, I prayed and wept and prayed some more. I begged God to not let this happen again in my life and ministry. I asked Him then and there to give me a plan that would assure a continued and thriving ministry beyond my years at Sierra Bible Church.

Little did I know, when I took that short detour, what forces would be released into my life and into the life of Sierra Bible Church. As a result of those two divine appointments, the Thrive workshop and this brief visit to the church site in Moab, the Holy Spirit began to set into motion a plan that

would find its culmination on Sunday, June 4, 2017. Please, allow me to share with you the rest of the story.

Chapter One

As I returned home from that little stopover in Utah, the Holy Spirit began answering my prayer, speaking into my heart a plan for a day that lay ahead for the ministry of Sierra Bible Church. For the next two months, He began to shape and solidify a plan that would set up Sierra Bible Church for success beyond my days as its senior pastor.

Each year, near the end of October, the elders and pastoral staff of Sierra Bible Church have gone into a time of retreat. The retreat is a time for us to pray for our congregation and to prayerfully strategize for the next year's ministry.

It had now been two months since the Holy Spirit had spoken to my heart on the church property in Moab. Two months in which He had been instructing me about a future pastoral succession plan for Sierra Bible Church. It was now time for me to share this vision with the church elders and pastoral staff.

I began my remarks to the elders by reminding them that every pastor is an interim pastor, whether his tenure at a church is two years or twenty.

Eventually, every pastor will move on in some way. He may answer a call to another church, he might retire from pastoral ministry, he might die, or, heaven forbid, he might be fired. But, sooner or later, he would move on, and the church would then seek another to take his place. I told the elders that we can either actively prepare for that day, or we can let it take us unawares.

Since it was inevitable that I would one day step aside as the senior pastor of Sierra Bible Church, I challenged the elders with this question. What if I were to be hit by a bus tomorrow? What would you do? We began then and there to put together an emergency succession plan, better known in our circle as the “What if Wayne gets hit by a bus” plan.

For the previous ten years, Jesse Richardson had been ministering at my side as the church’s youth pastor. Jesse had grown up in Sierra Bible Church. A couple of years after graduating from high school, Jesse moved to San Diego to attend a discipleship program called the School of Evangelism. Seeing in him great ministry potential, Jesse was asked to join the staff of Horizon Church following his graduation from the school. For the next several years, Jesse was mentored and trained by the leaders of that church. He served the church in many different capacities, teaching and preaching included.

Some five years into Jesse's tenure at Horizon, Sierra Bible Church began the search for a youth pastor. As I prayed about this matter, the Holy Spirit kept bringing Jesse to my mind. With the approval of the elder board, I contacted Jesse and ask if he would prayerfully consider returning to Truckee and become the youth pastor of Sierra Bible Church, a call which he eventually accepted. Under Jesse's leadership the youth group a Sierra Bible Church grew and prospered.

Besides, his duties as youth pastor, Jesse would also periodically fill the pulpit on Sunday mornings and eventually started a Sunday evening service, in which he was the primary teacher/preacher. While sitting under Jesse's preaching one evening, the Lord spoke to my heart, "You are looking at the man who will one day fill your position at this church." It was with that in mind that I began to direct the conversation concerning the "What if Wayne gets hit by a bus" plan.

It didn't take long for the elders to say that Jesse would probably be their first consideration if I did get hit by a bus. With that on the table, I suggested that we begin to strategically plan for the day that I would no longer be the senior pastor.

I suggested that we hire a new youth pastor and make Jesse my associate, my right-hand man. I also suggested that with this new role that Jesse would be given oversight of the church staff. With no future date set for my demise or departure, the elders embraced the plan that I had set forth. This would be the beginning of a four-year journey in which none of us could see or imagine what God would eventually do.

Chapter Two

While pastoring in Moab, Utah, I enjoyed rafting the rivers of the region, primarily the Green and Colorado Rivers. Part of the skill of river rafting is letting the river do the work by finding and staying in the main current or the tongue of the river. Along the shores of these rivers are many eddies, pockets of water that literally flow in a different direction from the main current. Some are very placid and calm, giving the river rafter segues to the shore for various breaks. Some of these eddies are violent and virtually impossible to escape once sucked in. These eddies will suck a boat under and tear it apart. So, the oarsman is continually looking for the tongue of the current, where the river naturally pulls one's raft along, needing only slight movements of the oars to keep the raft centered and moving downstream.

In Eugene Petersen's paraphrased edition of the New Testament, the Message, he includes the following line in his translation of Matthew 11:28-30, "...and learn the unforced rhythms of grace."

Over the years, I have learned to seek the currents of the Holy Spirit's leading and guiding in my personal life and in the life of the two churches that He has allowed me to pastor, His unforced and grace-filled rhythms. That is how He continued to guide me as I attempted to lead Sierra Bible Church towards a pastoral transition that would leave the congregation anticipating what God had in store for the church in the coming days and not living in the glories of days gone by.

I was ordained into the gospel ministry in January of 1977. In the past 45 years I have had a front-row seat, from which I have viewed the ups and downs of ministry. I have watched churches navigate the crucial waters of pastoral succession, and like the unescapable eddies that I have mentioned above, I've watched pastors and churches chewed up and spit out by the unpredictable currents of pastoral change.

Pastoral transitions are critical times in the life of a church. All too often, without warning, when a pastor retires, accepts a call to another church, dies, or on rare occasions, is fired, churches find themselves dead in the

water while they spend the next one to three years seeking a new senior pastor.

Often, the search for a new pastor is done outside of the four walls of the church. Like a fisherman trying to lure in the “big one,” churches begin to cast their lines into a pool of pastoral candidates, either within their denomination or outside of it.

Granted, some churches were already in a treading water just to stay afloat phase, when their pastor resigned and decided to move on. Other churches have been caught off guard by the death of a pastor or a moral failing of some sort that led to his being fired. These churches, which were often thriving, are then thrown into a black hole of, “What do we do next?”

As previously stated, some pastoral transitions can last for years. There is the searching for acceptable candidates and the extending of a call. Once a new man has been called there is usually a period of at least a year, that can be likened to a honeymoon, where pastor and congregation get to know one another.

Often, during this two to three-year hiatus, thriving ministries begin to languish; impatient parishioners begin visiting other churches and attendance numbers begin to dwindle in this between pastors’ phase.

I know that when I became the senior pastor of Sierra Bible Church in 1991, I was coming to a wounded church, a church that had been through three pastors in as many years and was deeply in debt. To help me facilitate my honeymoon time, God's instructions to my heart were not to change a thing for at least one year. Love this congregation; earn the right to be heard and to lead. The result was a patient bandaging of old hurts and wounds, applying God's healing balm before a renewed health and vitality could begin to appear.

I have come to believe that God has a better way to transition from one leader to the next, a transition that allows a church to keep moving forward without the loss of vital momentum. That better way is to raise up someone from within the church, someone who already shares its values, its vision, and already knows and loves its people. We see this modeled for us in scripture as Moses passed the mantle of ministry to Joshua, Elijah to Elisha, and Paul to Timothy.

This takes time, it takes patience, it takes a great amount of humility for a pastor to mentor and to raise up one who will one day succeed him in his present position. Don't think for a moment that I did not wrestle with these feelings, especially when after giving freer rein to the one being mentored, I realized, that in many areas of his ministry, Jesse was more gifted than I.

As God made it increasingly clear to me that Jesse was the one, that He had chosen to succeed me one day, I had to begin to sell that notion not only to my elders and staff but also to the congregation at Sierra Bible Church. I had been their pastor for over twenty years. I had dedicated, baptized, and married their children, I had held them in times of crisis, and had buried their loved ones. To them, my talking of stepping aside seemed paramount to abandonment. How would I convince them that God had their best interest at heart? How would I show them that for me to obey God's leading was to have their best interest at heart as well?

One analogy that was given to Jesse and me during this process was one that used poker chips to make a point. In my twenty plus years as the senior pastor, I had earned a stack of chips that represented favor and credibility. Even though Jesse had been at my side for ten of those years, and had compiled a chip stack of his own, it had fewer chips in it than did mine. So, I had to deliberately begin moving chips from my stack into his. How did I do this? I did it by continuing to state that I truly believed that Jesse was my successor, a successor chosen by God, not me. I did it by giving him more and more ministry responsibilities and preaching opportunities.

I was also very fortunate to be dealing with a man who was not chomping at the bit to take over my position. Jesse was patient and biding his time, he too was trusting that it would all happen in God's time.

Up until that time, the vast majority of Jesse's ministry experience had been with youth and young adults. The members of Sierra Bible Church ranged from newborns to men and women in their 80's. One day Jesse asked me this question, "When will you know that I am ready to be the Senior Pastor of this church?" My response to him was, "When your love for the gray-heads of this church is as great as your love for its younger members."

Chapter Three

In January of 2014, Jesse assumed his new duties as my associate pastor as well as the title of teaching pastor at Sierra Bible Church. As earlier stated, these new duties involved supervising the other members of the pastoral and office staff. This involved the scheduling and the leading of our weekly staff meetings. He was also required, along with some of the elders, to lead the annual evaluations of each staff member.

This is when I began to receive a bit of a push back against the plan that I truly believed was of God. The problem was that there were people on the staff who were not only older than Jesse but who also had served in their

respective positions for twice as long as Jesse had been serving the church. I was told by one of the staff members, "I don't agree with what you are doing." If it had been my plan, I too could have said the same thing, but I was convinced that this was God's plan and encouraged patience in the process. Ultimately, the entire staff embraced this new plan and as they did there developed a new-found unity among our staff members.

There were also members of the congregation who pulled me aside to ask if I really knew what I was doing. One of the drawbacks that Jesse had to face was that he had grown up in Sierra Bible Church; there were people who had known him since he was a child. Jesse had to face some of the "...a prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown" moments. This is where I had to stay the course because I truly believed that it was God's course.

As time passed, as I continued to move chips from my side of the table to Jesse's, the congregation at Sierra Bible Church bought into God's new plan more and more. Then, a day came on which I knew that it was time to draw a line in the sand and say, this is the day towards which we have been moving.

Early in May of 2016, the Lord solidified a timeline in my heart. I then called Jesse into my office and told him that in one year, I would be passing the senior pastor baton to him, and he would become the next senior pastor of Sierra Bible Church on June 4, 2017. He now had a timeline and thirteen months in which to prepare himself and his family. At that time, he also said to me that he did not want to do this unless I was going to be at his side through the transitions that would lay out before us.

The following Sunday, after reiterating God's calling me to pastor Sierra Bible Church and reminiscing about the events that we had shared together over the past 25 years, I then stated the following to the members of the congregation I so dearly loved.

My Dear Family in Christ at Sierra Bible Church,

I am not sick, I am not tired, I am not burned out, so let me try to help you understand more fully the things that I have shared with you this morning.

I have been privileged and blessed by God to serve Sierra Bible Church as its Senior Pastor since June 1, 1991. I was called by God to the pastorate forty years ago and still feel His calling on my life to shepherd His flock. I have been called and gifted by God as a pastor/teacher, and I still have a great passion to love His church and teach His word to His people.

Presently, I still have energy, enthusiasm, and a calling to serve God's flock at Sierra Bible Church. **What I don't want for Sierra Bible Church is for me to wake up one day and find myself at a point where I no longer have the passion and energy to lead.** Therefore, after much prayer and contemplation, I believe that God would have me use my present energy, enthusiasm, and experience to pass on the baton of leadership, and to assume a different pastoral role in my areas of giftedness so that Sierra Bible Church may continue to Follow Jesus and Make Disciples without skipping a beat.

Thirteen years ago, this summer, I felt the leading of God to extend a call to Jesse Richardson to come back to Truckee and become the Youth Pastor of Sierra Bible Church. Jesse and his wife Alli accepted that call and moved to Truckee. In January of 2014, Jesse's ministry role at Sierra Bible Church changed from that of Youth Pastor to Teaching Pastor. In that role, Jesse has continued to preach on Sunday nights as well as fill the Sunday morning pulpit in my absence. For the past two years, he has also supervised the pastoral and office staff at Sierra Bible Church, scheduling and leading weekly staff meetings as well as leading the annual evaluation process of each staff member. Jesse is continually discipling other men and women for service in Christ's Church as well as developing leadership

and discipleship curriculum, he also played a vital role in the defining of the church's present statement of mission and purpose.

As I have worked side by side with Pastor Jesse these past twelve and a half years, I have become convinced that God has raised him up to shepherd this church beyond me and have recommended that Pastor Jesse would succeed me one day as the Senior Pastor of Sierra Bible Church. What I have recommended to the elders and the elders now recommend to the body is that from now to June 4, 2017 Pastor Jesse's ministry responsibilities will increase and my Senior Pastor Responsibilities would decrease with me eventually becoming an associate member of the pastoral staff carrying out ministry duties as directed by the new Senior Pastor.

I believe that it is right that Pastor Jesse succeed me as the Senior Pastor of Sierra Bible Church. He has demonstrated a passion for the ministry of Sierra Bible Church as it has endeavored to Follow Jesus and Make Disciples. He has a zeal for proclaiming the eternal truths of God's Word. I have watched Jesse's leadership gifts develop both within our local church, our community, and also the Central Pacific District of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, where his gifts and calling are being recognized.

I have observed Jesse's leading and have seen him live out the values embraced by Sierra Bible Church, honoring God, God's Word, Grace, Unity, Integrity, and Compassion. Jesse has shown diligence in understanding the times and culture in which we live. He is a learner who continues to grow in his desire to know God and to know God's Word. Jesse is well read, has a firm grasp of theology, and can powerfully defend the faith with truth and grace.

I have watched as God continues to develop Jesse's shepherd's heart. I have watched as his passion and love for the whole of the body at Sierra Bible Church has continued to grow and develop. I have watched him develop as a man of God, a preacher, a teacher, a shepherd, and as a husband and father. Together Jesse and Alli have demonstrated a heart to shepherd Christ's church.

Sierra Bible Church, I love you more than words can express. Serving you these past twenty-five years has been one of my life's greatest joys and privileges. It is my desire and my prayer to serve you for many more years to come, as I continue to exercise my ministry gifts, walking at Jesse's side where I might serve him and assist him in becoming the pastor that God has called him to be, all under the oversight of the one true Shepherd of Sierra Bible Church, the Lord Jesus Christ.

With all my heart I believe that the most fruitful, the most impactful, and the most influential days of Sierra Bible Church, both locally and globally lie out ahead of us, not behind us. God has graciously allowed me to lay a foundation upon which another is now called to build. Working at Jesse's side as he builds on that foundation is, what I believe to be, the next chapter of my ministry call.

To God Be the Glory,

Pastor Wayne.

Chapter Four

On Sunday, June 4, 2017, nearly 600 people gathered together at Truckee's Regional Park, for a Pastoral Handoff Sunday. There we celebrated what it was God had done, was doing, and getting ready to do in fifty-two-year life and ministry of Sierra Bible Church.

After a time of singing unto the Lord, I spoke my last words to the body as their senior pastor, my heart was overflowing with joy as we reminisced and celebrated God's goodness and grace. I then called Pastor Jesse to the stage and with a football in my hand, I handed it off to the one who would now carry it and lead Sierra Bible Church into the future.

That was four and a half years ago, and Sierra Bible Church has thrived

and grown under Pastor Jesse's leadership. I don't believe that there was a single family at the church who moved on because of the hand off. God continues to confirm that the time was right for me to step aside and hand off my pastoral role of leadership to another. And I am still convinced that the best days, the most fruitful days of this ministry lay out ahead.

What has happened here has been the result of a plan, a deliberate plan that God laid upon my heart, a plan to which I was obedient, a plan that, over a four-year period of time, became embraced by a church body willing to obediently follow God into the future.

I could have held on, but if I had, I would have been walking in disobedience to God and would have lost the right to call his people to obey his voice and his leading, if I, their pastor, refused to obey.

My recommendation to all of the "interim pastors" out there, begin now to ask God in prayer, "How would you have me to prepare this church for the years of its ministry beyond my leadership? Who would you have to follow me?" Perhaps there's a younger man in your congregation who needs to be trained, a young man who the church would commit to sending to school, paying his tuition and fees through the process. Perhaps, it is

someone who is presently a member of your staff, someone that you can now begin to prepare to succeed you at some point.

Believe me when I tell you that once you start down this path, there will be temptations to circumvent the process, you will find yourself second-guessing yourself. But to turn back along that path would be disastrous.

This is not about you; it is about Christ's Church and what is best for it in the days ahead. Pastor Jesse is so much more gifted than I am in many different areas. I had to release him to see just how gifted.

Today, in the truest sense of the word, Pastor Jesse is my pastor. I am thrilled to sit under his teaching and submit to his leadership. My heart is full and overflowing with joy as I witness the ongoing ministry of Sierra Bible Church.