

7

Costly Mistakes Churches Make in Pastoral Succession.

A pastor's field guide to leading transition with clarity, alignment, and confidence — before urgency forces your hand.

BY RUSS OLMON

Helping pastors finish well, and leaders rise well.

RussOlmon.com

INTRODUCTION

Every church will experience leadership transition.

The only question is —

Will it be intentional, or reactive?

Too many churches delay the conversation until it becomes unavoidable. And when that happens, leaders are forced to make critical decisions under pressure rather than with clarity.

The risks are real — and often underestimated:

- Confusion among leaders
- Tension between generations
- Loss of momentum at a critical time
- Congregational uncertainty about the future

What's most concerning is this: these challenges rarely show up all at once — they develop quietly, over time. After guiding churches through succession involving founding pastors, co-senior transitions, and next-generation leaders, one truth is clear:

**Succession doesn't fail
because of lack of calling.
It fails because of lack of clarity.**

PART 1 / MISTAKES 1-4

The seven mistakes.

These patterns rarely show up in isolation. Most churches that struggle through transition are navigating two, three, or more of them at once.

01 Waiting Too Long to Start the Conversation

Succession is not an event — it is a multi-year leadership process. When it becomes urgent, options narrow and pressure increases.

02 Lack of Elder Alignment

Unity cannot be assumed — it must be built. If elders are not fully aligned, uncertainty will ripple through the entire church.

03 Undefined Roles Between Outgoing and Incoming Leaders

Ambiguity creates tension, even among strong leaders. Clarity around authority, influence, and timing builds trust and confidence.

04 Ignoring the Emotional and Identity Side of Transition

For many pastors, this is more than a leadership change — it is a transition of identity, calling, and legacy. If this is not addressed, it will surface in unintended ways.

PART 1 / MISTAKES 5-7

Continued.

05 Poor Communication with Staff and Congregation

Silence creates speculation.

Delayed or unclear communication erodes trust at the very moment it is needed most.

06 No Clear Timeline or Milestones

Without defined phases, transitions drift.

Momentum is lost, and leadership credibility can be weakened.

07 Treating Succession as a Private Decision Instead of a Leadership Process

Healthy succession is not decided in isolation.

It is built through structured pastor and leadership-board engagement over time.

WHAT WORKS INSTEAD

A different path forward.

Churches that navigate succession well don't follow the default pattern. They follow a fundamentally different path:

- They start earlier than feels necessary.
- They build strong, elder-led alignment before making public moves.
- They define roles and expectations with precision.
- They follow a structured, phase-based transition plan.
- They communicate intentionally at every stage.
- They invest in coaching for both outgoing and incoming leaders.

CASE STUDY SNAPSHOT

“Russ guided us through one of the most critical seasons in our church's history with clarity, structure, and unity. The result is a transition that feels healthy, aligned, and full of momentum.”

— PASTOR PAUL BOOKO
Founding Pastor, Riverside Church

“Because of Russ, we didn't just get through succession — we executed a transition that strengthened our church. Our staff is aligned, our elders are confident, and our congregation is unified.”

— PASTOR ERICK PENN
Incoming Senior Pastor

The most important decision is not who comes next.

It is whether the process is clear, aligned, and intentionally led.

FREE 30-MIN CALL

Book a Succession Consultation

No pressure, no sales pitch — just a conversation about your transition.

russolmon.com/church-succession-consult

LEARN MORE

Explore the Full Succession Process

Read about Russ's structured approach and the three pathways forward.

RussOlmon.com/succession

Helping pastors finish well, and leaders rise well — so the church moves forward stronger into the next generation.