

William:

Hey, guys. We're in another installment of succession podcast. You're going to start to think I'm the guy that always got a hammer. So everything looks like a nail. Every guest is about succession, but you know what? As we launch our new book on succession, this updated and expanded version of Next with 150 new pages of research, I'm excited to see other books about succession coming out. And my guest today, Gary Smith, is a friend and a pastor here in Texas who did a magnificent job of succession. He not only got his church ready long before, but he was able to transition his church into their first non-white pastor on staff.

William:

And now that person is his successor in a neighborhood where the demographics have shifted and continue to shift in that direction. It's an amazing story but even more, Gary talks about the emotional journey of being the pastor who has to let go and sooner or later, we're all going to face letting go of whatever leadership we have. And Gary talks about what he expected, what he didn't expect and what you can expect as you prepare yourself for the day when your successor comes along. There's no more valuable lesson in leadership than the lesson of learning how to prepare for your team's long-term legacy. I think you're going to get a lot out of what Gary has to say today. I hope you'll take good notes. I hope you'll listen. And I look forward to taking this journey with you. Let's listen in.

William:

Well, hey everybody, thanks so much for making time to join us again today. As you know, we're in the middle of a campaign of talking about succession, as we move out of a season of a pandemic and into a season of post pandemic, which may take a while to get there, but we're moving there. And I think everybody can feel that and see it. We're talking about moving in seasons. We've re-released our brand new book, Next: Pastoral Succession That Works. It's up with 150 new pages of research and Warren Bird and I have tried to take data and match it with some stories, but along the way, the coolest thing has happened in the last six or seven years. People that are starting to talk about succession are actually writing about it in a way that brings a personal touch that I couldn't bring.

William:

And today, we're lucky we've got Gary Smith on with us and Gary's written a book called Pastoral Transitions. I sat down and read it and really enjoyed it. And what I took away from it was, this is a pastor who has walked through this and has talked to other pastors who have walked through this and it really focused on the journey emotionally of what it's like to have to walk through a succession. So it's so cool to see different voices writing in different ways. And I want you to get a copy of Pastoral Transitions today. But more than that, I want you to spend the next little bit enjoying a visit with Gary and me. And Gary, thanks for joining us today. Really appreciate you making time. You're just coming off having had COVID, is that right?

Gary Smith:

Oh, yes. 10 full days of it. Fatigue and fun, but doing good, doing real good fact.

William:

Well, that's good. I appreciate it. And it's a big, big kingdom. I didn't know how many different churches there were out there till I started doing this 13 years ago now. And I don't know that everybody knows

your story. So why don't you tell everybody a little bit about your journey and then what ultimately led you to writing this book?

Gary Smith:

Well, when I moved to Fielder Road, it was then Fielder Road Baptist Church, 25 years ago, 30 years ago now, I was actually at a conference where I listened to a pastor describe the transition that he had made of with a former youth minister coming in to be the pastor and how smooth the transition went and knowing how much turmoil was in that arena, I just put in the back of my mind, I'm going to do it differently if I get a chance. That I want to build a church that will last forever beyond me. And the best way to do that was to create a transition where there would not be this interim and a whipsaw of emotions and choosing a leader different and all the things that churches will do. So I always just kept it in the back of my mind.

Gary Smith:

And then by God's Providence, about eight or so years before we started, I knew I was going to be moving out in eight to 10 years, a Hannon missions associate in our church that I asked to preach one Sunday. And when he got finished preaching the Lord, it was like Jesse's son, the Lord said-

William:

Wow!

Gary Smith:

... to God. And of course we didn't have a process to do it, discovered an incredible preacher leader, Godly man that was sitting there on my staff. And so I started moving things in a direction not to manipulate them, but to get this in process. And I actually left a little earlier than I'd planned on, which I'm glad I did.

William:

Oh, really? Why now, I may interrupt you. Why is that?

Gary Smith:

Well, I had really set up a financial plan and a direction for my life to stop when I was about 70. 70 is the new 65.

William:

Yes.

Gary Smith:

But this guy just got ready. It became so obvious. The hand of God was on him. I had a little fear that he would, because other churches were after him like crazy, but it was just the time. It's amazing how when you just know that you know that this is the time, wouldn't want a plant and our church voted 97%. Of course I had some moments. I wish they'd have voted last for him to be the guy, but our church just so affirmed it. And the process happens so smoothly. I actually did two years after we made the transition, preached once a month at one of our locations. I'm still involved in the church as a light person, still preach. I'm preaching a week from Sunday, but we became best friends. I'm his biggest advocate. You

want to get in a fight, say something bad about him. And so the journey was we went through a three-year process after the church voted of handing it off. It really was a year too long and by 25th anniversary-

William:

How do you know it would have... So I'm interrupting too much.

Gary Smith:

No.

William:

I used to say, you mind if I interrupt but [crosstalk 00:06:29] interrupted. So how did you know... Probably the number one question I get to ask is if we're going to do an overlap, which isn't the right thing for everybody, although it's worked well for you. If we're going to do an overlap, how long should the overlap be? And what I keep hearing, I keep hearing people say, "I haven't seen any real benefit after about two years." So it's funny that you say that. What in you makes you say that three years was a little too long.

Gary Smith:

Well, what happened is we did that because he had never pastored before. That's the three years in motion for the church to save. We need three years.

William:

Okay.

Gary Smith:

You give this man the time to do it. It became obvious at about 10 months into the three years that that the first year had moved quicker.

William:

Wow!

Gary Smith:

What he was going to do, and we actually had a written game plan of how we would hand it off. And the first year happened in 10 months, the next year happened in about seven or eight months. It was very obvious that I was an appendage. And what happened just by God's providence is my 25th anniversary happened at about the two year and three month mark. And I said, goodbye. We said goodbye on that day, they paid me for the three years, praise to God for that.

William:

Yes.

Gary Smith:

But it just, and that's what we said is this is... We're not going to set up an iron clad way we're going to do this. We're going to play it as long as it goes. And the church gave our pastors advisory council, the ability to superintend this as they thought needed. And but I would admit the three years, I don't know where there would ever need to be a three-year process. Again, I would never recommend more than two. If he's not that equipped for it. And if you had a real young man that was a young own staff and he needed more seasoning, this guy was ready to go. He had his gun reloaded [inaudible 00:08:36] and-

William:

Well, that's interesting because I'm 51. So I've got a lot of runway left, I hope. But I'm very wary. Church is one thing, but a consulting firm, especially if he lets my talking to naming it after yourself, that's a bad idea. But I don't want to be the lid around here. So I tell people I'm trying to make myself less essential every year and for good or bad, that's proving a lot easier than I thought it would. So apparently I'm not as needed as I thought. But how did that feel to realize, Oh man, this went so fast, just like that.

Gary Smith:

Oh. Well, what's again, the providence of God. And I say this in my book is I didn't feel my ministry was over. And I got to a point a year-and-a-half into it. I was more excited about what I was going to do than what I was doing. And I was after stuff. I was building the future, what I was going to do, my non-profit and I was doing more of that than I was church work. I had stuff I wanted to do. I wanted to be released from the church to go do. So and he was coming in checking my blood pressure every three days, but I could see he was ready and he had his gun loaded. And so there wasn't any conflict about it. We all just knew that we knew that we knew and God gave some specific transition points to make that happen.

Gary Smith:

So I left in August. I was paid through the next April. I headed out of town, went to wife for seven weeks. We got completely disconnected. And then when I came back, they already had me scheduled to preach beginning in January, February. And so our church never knew when they didn't have a pastor or when I was gone or he wasn't the guy, but it was happening.

William:

Wow.

Gary Smith:

And also what happened, William, is I spent that first year and a half rearranging the staff to suit him, so I started spending my chips. I call it stocking the refrigerator for him. I started spending my chips on his future, his vision, moving the staff out that needed to be moved out, creating the positions that he needed. So we use that time somewhat for him to get his vision. But then after 10 months for that, the next year, it became about what he wanted, how I could help him do what he wanted. I became an appendage. There wasn't any need for me to be there. I didn't go to any meetings. And then I had stuff I wanted to do.

William:

So I'm hearing two critical things that I hear over and over and over. So first of all, if you're listening today and you're taking notes, get your cookie cutter plan for succession, put your pencil down because Gary said something really smart earlier. He said, "We held it loosely, no ironclad plan." There is no

cookie. If somebody tells you here are the five steps, run away because every church is so different and you're different and your success is different. I've told people before my... My teenage girls came a couple of years ago, Gary, and they said, "Dad, we know what we want for Christmas." And I'm like, "What do you want?" "We want a new camera." I'm like, "You have the iPhone 20 or whatever. You don't need a new camera." They're like, "No, no, no, no, no. This is a cool camera. This camera, you take the picture and film spits out of the bottom of it, brand new technology."

William:

And I said, "Is it called Polaroid?" They're like, "Whoa, how'd` you know?" But I heard them talking about it. It made me think about that film. And it made me think about succession. And remember when that film would come out of camera, it's just dark?

Gary Smith:

Yeah.

William:

And you waited it and shake it like crazy. And then it'd get a little clear. It's like when Jesus healed the blind man in the gospel of Mark and said, "Can you see?" And he said, "Well, a little bit." And the people look like trees and, "All right. Now can you see?" I think succession develops a little differently for everybody. And you all were so wise to not have this cookie cutter. But having said that two things, two big points to take down. If you're taking notes today, that Gary's church did absolutely right. One, they funded their pastor.

Gary Smith:

Yes.

William:

Gary could step away and not have to worry why am I taking a pay cut now? Can I afford to do this? And you might say, well, we can't afford to pay two pastors for six months or nine months or a year, whatever. You know what you can't afford? You can't afford to mess your succession up.

Gary Smith:

That's right. The average church loses 20% of membership and offerings in a normal transition. Well, multiply your budget times 20%. So for us at that point had been \$2 million. So I think he'd spent a lot of money on a transition.

William:

And be okay.

Gary Smith:

And one of the things too, you just mentioned is very important, is financial planning. Want to get into that if I can. Many guys hang on too long because you're at your best earning time. You're at your time, you've got the most freedom to travel. You and your wife are enjoying some things you didn't get to enjoy in the past. Having a financial planner sit down and help you put together a spreadsheet. Very, very important. So that I even knew when I left a couple of years early, where I was in the plan, what I

needed to do to make up for the plan. So financial planning for you and for the wife is important. In fact, my planner would say, "When your wife gets nervous, have her call me."

William:

Oh wow.

Gary Smith:

And so he would call and say, "Sam, here's where you are. Here's where you're going. Here's what's going to happen. We have this plan in motion." So financial planning is very, very important today.

William:

Yeah. Well, and the interesting thing in the Bible, when retirement's mentioned, it talks about the priest retiring and the financial responsibility falls upon the people of God to provide for those priests, even after they're done in their current role. So it's a both thing, both pastor and wife need to be planning or pastor and husband, if it's a female pastor, but the church needs to be planning to spend a more than they thought they would have to, which will be less than messing it up.

Gary Smith:

Yes.

William:

The second thing I heard you say, Gary, and I'd love to hear a little bit about it is you were looking forward to something to do.

Gary Smith:

Yes.

William:

And I used to think when I retire, I'm going to go play as much golf as I want but nobody enjoys chasing a white ball around that much, especially when you can't hit it very far anymore. So how did you know that's such good wisdom because I think smart people, even when you're 45 or 50, you need to start thinking about what are my things I'm going to do after I'm not in the... What are you doing now? And how did you come to that knowledge that this is what I need to do?

Gary Smith:

Well, people who've retired and quit die. When you just watch it physically, mentally, spiritually, I think we need to be in the game till we die. I think need that. So I realized that. Also knew I had a lot of energy. I had a lot of resource inexperience that I just didn't want to waste. I wanted to have a way to pass it on. So I did a deal. There's a book called The 210 Project phase 210, where God's workmanship creating Christ Jesus for good works, which he's prepared for us. So I was of the opinion that God had prepared me from something not to pastor anymore. And so I went through the 210 Project. You can go online and find it. It's an excellent book. They actually take you through a passion survey, gift survey, ability survey, what you want to do.

Gary Smith:

And they come up with a two page sheet of what your sweet spot is. And so what I did out of that was find my sweet spot. I started after my strength in sweet spot, all the things I've had to do as a pastor to get to preach and to do the things I wanted to, I didn't have to do that anymore.

William:

Wow. Wow.

Gary Smith:

I couldn't [inaudible 00:16:35] in the sweet spot. So I formed a non-profit called Real Church Solutions. And actually, not suggesting if I do this, I told friends of mine, what I wanted to do with my future. I wanted to do it and not monetizing every church and every relationship. So I actually set a budget, I raised the money forward, and I set a limit because I didn't want to be out there raising money I hated. And so I put together a non-profit to fund my sweet spot.

Gary Smith:

And I went after that. And the day I left my church, I took a few months off, but I couldn't wait to get back and get busy. Now I do play quite a bit more golf than ever played, which is okay. You need to have some fun, but I got after stuff. And so I have this non-profit with about five or six things I'm doing, and I'm busy, busy, busy, but I'm not so busy like I was. And there's a relaxing to it. There is a sense I love to go in and advise pastors, say goodbye, walk out the door and leave it with them. And so I'm doing a lot of that. And so what I recommend to guys is find out what your sweet spot is and design something for your future. Some guys just want to go be an interim pastor. I didn't want to do that.

William:

It's not a bad gig. It's not a bad gig. You go move around, preach your favorite sermons-

Gary Smith:

Yes.

William:

Kind of helped it.

Gary Smith:

But I'm the kind of guy that if I walk into a church, I'm thinking of five things they need to change tomorrow to be better.

William:

That's not a good interim.

Gary Smith:

That's not a good interim. I couldn't just walk in and say, "Yeah, you all keep doing this so crummy." And I said, if I'm going to do that, might as well go pastor a church somewhere. So I do preach a lot out to the side. I've done some interim type stuff, but primarily thing, my sweet spot is not preaching. It is leadership. It is helping pastors become more effective and face transitions. Our church did a multi-

ethnic transition that was phenomenal. So I help churches with Adam in a church planting project in Seattle. So I just found my sweet spot and got after it. And guys need to find something to do.

William:

I want to get to the book and the emotional journey, but I want to pause. I really want to hit on this, you brought it up. So I'll bring it up now. You guys had vision that a lot of churches don't have. The area around Fielder Road and now your locations was... The demographics were shifting pretty radically. And you guys had the foresight to say, "This isn't slowing down to speeding up." And so you followed yourself with a non-white pastor. I assume that's the first non-white senior pastor that Fielder Road has ever had. Would that be fair?

Gary Smith:

You're getting first non-white staff member Fielder Road.

William:

That right. [crosstalk 00:19:36]. So how did you have that vision? And then how did you sell that vision? Because it sounds good on paper, but it's hard to get implemented.

Gary Smith:

Well, William probably it is a paradox. It may be the most challenging thing I ever did in my life.

William:

Wow.

Gary Smith:

But at the other side, it is the most rewarding thing I ever did in our church. Our church today is 35% non-Anglo. We're off the chart in those things. And but I didn't do it because it was a church growth strategy. I did it because it was right that our churches-

William:

Oh, wow.

Gary Smith:

... do not reflect the communities that we live in. That's wrong. That is not of God. And so I just went after it, believing the hand of God would be on it. And that's exactly what happened. And our church moved in that transition. I'm grateful today. I had people who came up that were against it, put their arm around me and say, "Pastor, we would not have a church today if you'd not done this."

William:

Wow. Wow.

Gary Smith:

So I've got those attaboys that God's given me, but it is not easy putting the races together. Look at America, how divided we are. And when the church becomes multiethnic, it's a challenge, William. It still



is. But it is the kingdom. And is what brings the hand of God. And now Fielder today, at one time, our preaching team was two Hispanics. One from, Jason Gavin, Venezuela, African-American and me and so I went through all that and diversified the staff, the stage, the nomenclature, the whole world, and just kept bringing home we should look like our community. And if we don't look like our community, we're sinning against God.

William:

Well, and I think that there are people out there listening today who need to know, in my estimation, if you'd left that to the new guy to fix, it wouldn't have gotten fixed, took somebody who'd been there who'd built up the, for lack of a better, nicer way of saying it, the political capital, the relational capital, the respect, and lived a long tenure of integrity to be able to look at folks say, this is what we're going to do. So some of you all out there, they're thinking about retiring. Maybe it's not being multicultural. Maybe it's dropping some program that is outdated now. Everyone ought to make a sacred cow list, right? And what are the things you need to do that if the new guy had to do it, it might be a really bad turn for the church. I just think you guys were way ahead of your time and the curve in doing that.

Gary Smith:

What I did is about six years out, I brought all the young staff in the room and said, "Tell me what kind of church you want to lead and tell me what Fielder needs to change." They made a list, four things. I said, "Okay, I'm going to spend my last years changing those things to get it ready for you."

William:

Wow.

Gary Smith:

And we changed the name to bad bus out of the name. We changed the politics, put a pastor's advisory council, a semi elder world. I made about four changes. But I spent my chips on that. And what you said is right, the guy going out can do that. Now, it's not the easy way out. The nice thing is to resign, get patted on the back, have a nice offering and say goodbye to you. I didn't want to leave a church that was going to be in turmoil.

William:

Wow.

Gary Smith:

It would change. And I want to make the changes. And that's why I call it stocking the refrigerator for the next guy.

William:

That's good.

Gary Smith:

I want him to have that.

William:

That's good. Now in reading your book, I couldn't help, but hear and emotional journey.

Gary Smith:

Yes.

William:

And that had to come out of your own heart somewhere. So tell me the burden God put on you. And just give us a preview of what you're talking about there, because I couldn't have written your book. I didn't run all the way to the finish line as I ran a long time as a pastor, but not as long as you. Tell me about that burden and the message you're trying to get out there.

Gary Smith:

Well, first of all, it's both husband and wife there. I think that's a place that a guy needs to be careful that he'd neglect. If he neglects that, he's got trouble. Her life's been invested. Her soul has been invested. Her sense of self-worth is in that position. Many wives have ministries that are large parts of the life of the church. And so it's an emotional rollercoaster for both of them, for husband and wife, and the husband needs to be aware of that and draw her along. But when you talk about the emotions, it's like raising a child where it's your baby, you've lived and died with it like no one else has. You know, you're a senior pastor. It stops at your desk. The glory flows up, but also the trouble flows up and you've gotten both the glory and the trouble and that emotional attachment little things like no longer having a key.

Gary Smith:

I mean, I used to have the key. I could get in any door, anytime, any place. And I remember telling Jason that, and by the way, he let me keep a key. I get a key to get in. Emotions of being in the office and feeling irrelevant. They're now discussing the future and you're not part of that. You begin to feel an irrelevancy, a lack of worth, and a lack of value that your opinion doesn't count, that you walk up and conversations would be going and they would stop. And used to you walk up, I need to know what you're talking about because it all came to me.

William:

Wow.

Gary Smith:

Nothing comes to you anymore.

William:

Wow.

Gary Smith:

They're all going to his office. They're all talking to him, which they should. But when you've been used to that kind of feeling of worth and value and make difference, oh my goodness, I walked in my executive pastor's office one day, I shut the door, locked the door. I just started weeping. And he sitting there wondering did his wife leaving, did the dog die, whatever. And I finally looked at him and I said, "I feel at times I'm being pushed aside." And then I'm not of any value anymore around here." And I said,

"I'm not going to come around because," and he looked at me and he tried to, and I said, "No, I don't need you to explain it to me. I know what's going on. I just need to let you know that that feeling is in my soul."

William:

Wow.

Gary Smith:

Those feelings, that emotional, that irrelevancy of it's going somewhere without you, anybody that's a real leader that's built a Vanderbloemen and associates. Your soul has been invested in that. And so when you watch it going another direction, a good direction. Here's a phrase I have in my book. I say it's like your wife dating another man while you're still alive and her liking it. Okay. Because of the church is loving a new man and what has been your baby, your mate is going a new direction. A guy needs to be ready for that. I fortunately had some peers that I could call and gripe to gravel with, and they'd let me do it. They wouldn't try and answer it. And a couple of them later on went through their own transition. So they said, "Hey, I'm making notes right here."

Gary Smith:

But William, it is an emotional roller coaster, like crazy. I use a chapter in the book though called an advocate. If you remember that chapter, it's the chapter about you needs to have someone in the staff that's neutral. That person that was the advocate helped me dramatically with all of those things, because he was the one person I could go talk to and know that it was a safe place to talk.

William:

That's the role I end up playing a lot of times.

Gary Smith:

Yes.

William:

When we get hired, it's like, I don't have a magic cookie cutter, but I end up being this Switzerland in the equation.

Gary Smith:

Yes.

William:

It's amazing. The emotions that are attached to the whole thing.

Gary Smith:

Yes. And most of the time, the pastor and wife just need somebody to sit down and cry with. Most guys can self counsel themselves, especially if they can see someone who's navigated it successfully and helps them be aware of what's coming down the pike. Healthy guys can get there, but listen, your ego has to go to a place probably it's never been.

William:

Oh, man.

Gary Smith:

It's got to go on the shelf.

William:

That image of your wife dating, that hit home. I tell Adrian all the time, if I die before you, statistically I will, I want you to enjoy your life. Just don't bring a date to the funeral. Can you tell them about before... You tell them about before the funeral.

Gary Smith:

Yeah. Man, the church is loving the new guy, loving the new vision and you're sitting there applauding, but while you're applauding, you're going to go, "Did I not have any part in this?" Now, what's so great for me is Jason Paredes honors me like crazy. I have never lacked, being honored by him. When I preach, he gets up and I finished. He said, "Man, we are today because of what this guy did. He's done it all right."

William:

It's the right way. I want to save and win however many championships he's won now at Alabama and his last one where they just thumped the competition. I think he might even pass the Bear for most national championships. And they asked him "What do you credit your success to," and blah, blah, blah, blah, the typical questions. And the first thing he said was, "Had coach Bryant not built this program like he did, I would never have had the resources to do anything like I'm doing now." I'm like, dude, you get it, you get it. I say it this way, honor needs to flow up, respect needs to flow down. And if the outgoing guy can respect the new person and show that toward others and the incoming person can honor the person that's gone before, it's got a lot better chance of working.

Gary Smith:

I actually have an appendix in the book that Jason wrote about the way he went about things and his own emotions. And I did that on purpose just so people could hear from him. We've done a conference together where we got up and talked about this. One thing I would want to point out though, William, is this process is not for everyone.

William:

Yeah. We're getting asked now to come in 10, 15 years before the pastor retires to start laying the groundwork and that's getting smart. And sometimes the church doesn't have the person on staff. David's son didn't show up and in the end it doesn't work. So cookie cutter beware, but what a cool story Fielder is, and this pastoral transitions, it was just a real treat to read. And I think listeners out there, I think you're going to get something out of it. So I hope you'll pick up a copy, Gary. I appreciate you making time for us today. And it's great to see your face, been too long. I think it was at a golf course last time. Maybe another time.

Gary Smith:

Well, let me say to you, when you wrote the book that got us all started, let me endorse your book. I quote you about 10 times. In fact, you ought to send me commission. I sell your book all over the country because you really do help us catch what's going on. And let me commend you for the four-sided viewpoint of doing this. You're the one who helped guys like me. I get it done. And I want to thank you for doing that.

William:

Well, that's unnecessary, but I appreciate it very much. Yeah.

Gary Smith:

All right.

William:

Well, thank you all for listening and keep tuning in over the next five, six weeks as we keep hammering home, the need to just realize if you're a pastor, you're an interim pastor and there is a path forward and we want to help you find it. So take care, Gary. Thanks for joining us.

Gary Smith:

Remember one quote that you have for us is you'll long be remembered more by how you left and what you did while you were there.

William:

Yeah.

Gary Smith:

That's the key.

William:

Yeah. How you leave will forge your legacy.

Gary Smith:

That's right. I remember. God bless you.

William:

God bless you. And thank you for tuning in. We'll see you again soon.

Speaker 3:

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