

# Heir Apparent

A retiring pastor and his successor discover what it takes to make a transition plan work.

SKYE JETHANI

**W**hen King Charles II of Spain died in 1701 with no heir, the result was the War of Spanish Succession, which embroiled France, England, Italy, Austria, and the Netherlands in a conflict that lasted 13 years.

Planning ahead for succession matters. It's a lesson churches are learning, too, especially congregations with lead pastors of long tenure. How well a church plans for leadership transition may determine its long-term health. Failure to plan may result in stagnation, or as Spain discovered, serious conflict.

Pete Schwalm knew the dangers well. Senior pastor of Fairhaven Church in Dayton, Ohio, since 1983, Schwalm privately began thinking about succession ten years ago.

"I'd heard the war stories of new senior pastors coming in and cleaning house—getting rid of all the staff," says Schwalm. "Fairhaven has 15 fulltime pastoral staff members with families, and I genuinely care about them. I didn't want to see these great people forced to leave the church when I did."

Beyond affection for his pastoral team, Schwalm wanted Fairhaven's trajectory and direction to continue after his departure. He recognized that a lengthy search for a new senior pastor could stall the congregation that had grown from 500 when he began to over 3,000. "I hoped the church would continue basically in the same direction after I left."

This desire for continuity has led a growing number of churches to look for a new senior pastor from within their own ranks. When Stuart Briscoe retired from Elmbrook Church near Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the staff member who replaced him had already been at the church for more than 20 years.



Anticipating his own departure, Schwalm believed an internal plan of succession would be the least disruptive for the church. After investigating the transition plans of other churches, Schwalm first shared his thoughts with the governing board of Fairhaven in June 2001. The board recognized the benefits of a planned transition.

"We had seen another large church in Dayton go through a senior pastor change," said Fairhaven elder Tim Cornell. "The new pastor came from outside, and he did a great job, but he totally changed the church. We didn't want that. We liked the path we were on." With the board supporting the plan of finding the new pastor from within the church, one critical question remained—who?

## Floating the idea

David Smith came to Fairhaven with no intention of becoming the senior pastor. He was first introduced to the church while serving as pastor of an international church in Malaysia.

