



AN EXPLORATION OF MINISTERIAL TRANSITIONS IN THE AGE OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

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Although we can fill libraries with thousands of books, articles, and periodicals on the topic of leadership, an unsolved challenge of successful leadership is a successful transition. Servant leaders are charismatic and trustworthy. They inspire and elicit loyalty through their service and people-focus. Rather than prioritizing power, money, and personal success, servant leaders work to enable their people to succeed and empower them to meet the needs of the organization through their own self-realization. An interesting question arises in the exploration of servant leadership and succession planning. Are servant leaders better at planning their succession? In the United States, 84% of churches lack a succession plan for their senior leader (Vanderbloemen & Bird, 2020, p.30). In any 12-month period, there are approximately 30,000 U.S. pastors in transition, with more senior pastors older than 65 years of age than those under 40. Although leadership succession is expected (Sanou, 2021, p.29), inevitable (Olusegun, 2021), and a fact (Adkins, 2017), transition planning continues to be more of a reactive process (Blythe, 2005, p.14) and an afterthought. This article explores leadership succession through the lens of servant leadership and the transitions between Moses and Joshua, and Elijah and Elisha, and the working relationship between Paul and Timothy.

Keywords: servant leaders, leadership transitions, succession planning

Dave Travis defined pastoral succession as “the intentional transfer of power, leadership, and authority from one primary leader to another” (Vanderbloemen & Bird, 2020, p. 20). Leadership “succession is a process not an event” (p. 43). Of all the things successful leaders must do, succession planning may be one of the most difficult. As the chief executive officer of the church, the senior pastor is the fundraiser, administrator, and visionary; the *persona Christi capitis*—God’s representative on earth. The pastor has three main duties: “teaching, sanctifying, and governing” (Pope Benedict XVI, 2010, April

14). As God's visionary, the leader is responsible for the mission of the church and the organization's "cultural, ethnic, and theological traditions" (Lovelace, 2014, p. 257). The pastor is entrenched in church administration, rooted in the hearts and minds of the congregation, and embedded in the soul of the community in ways that are hard to explain, difficult to assess, and complex to separate when the time for succession has arrived. Because of this, the general belief may be that "pastors don't retire" (Vanderbloemen & Bird, 2020, p. 31). However, churches are confronted with the reality that "every pastor is an interim pastor" and that what organizations call succession planning is "replacement planning," which is more of a risk mitigation strategy (Adkins, 2017, p. 1). The reality is that it is risky and ill-advised not to have a succession plan (Vanderbloemen & Bird, 2020).

Thinking about what is next before it is required is a leadership imperative and a key attribute of extraordinary leaders (Vanderbloemen & Bird, 2020). Rather than proactive changeovers, leadership transitions are disruptive and complicated for several reasons. The first concern is having qualified candidates, followed by budgetary worries and role clarity. Then there are issues with timing, strategic direction, and the expectations of the incoming leader. Finally, executional variations, competing priorities, and misplaced transition anxiety can hinder leadership changes and obstruct the new leader's success. For churches, the "personal relationships... and the spiritual dimensions" complicate separating the reasons for the transitions from its impacts (Dollhopf & Scheitle, 2013). Transitions upset the inner workings of the organization from their effects on the "attitudes, emotions, and behaviors of all individuals involved" (Ballinger & Marcel, 2010), and because they trigger strategic shifts, human capital changes, relationship differences, and swings in the workflow (Lee & Tsai, 2024). Leadership transitions are about more than just passing the proverbial baton. Good intentions and hard work may lay the foundation for succession planning, but they do not ensure its success.

Vanderbloemen and Bird (2020) stated that wise pastors start thinking about what is next before it is required. This suggests servant leadership. Servant leaders are charismatic and trustworthy. They inspire and elicit loyalty through their service and people-focus. Rather than prioritizing power, money, and personal success, servant leaders work to enable their people to succeed and empower them to meet the needs of the organization through their own self-realization. An interesting question arises in the exploration of servant leadership and succession planning—are servant leaders better at planning their succession? Through an exegetical analysis of the transitions from Moses to Joshua (Num. 27:18–20) and Elijah to Elisha (2 Kings 2:12–14), this article will explore how servant leaders prepare for their successors and how successors are empowered to continue the ministerial mission. Through the life of these two great servant leaders, the goal is to understand if servant leaders demonstrate a better ability for succession planning.

LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

The current research around transitions agrees that they are challenging, chaotic, conflict-ridden, and risky. Successions require leadership formation, but according to Johnson (2022), "leadership development is treated as a luxury" rather than a need, and money is not allocated for this luxury (p. 3). Dollhopf and Scheitle

(2013) stated that most transitions are unplanned or ill-planned successions, but asserted that transitions that are planned have a positive impact on the new leader's success and the organization's success under the new leader's guidance. They further highlighted that while transitions are disruptive, their impact is felt prior to the actual event as the change can intensify "congregational conflict," which can be the reason for the change and a consequence of it (p. 676). Church transition can lead to membership decline or create opportunities. These opportunities can come from a more focused organizational direction, better defined roles, and better-established identities of the new leader and the organization (pp. 676–677).

Other challenges can arise with staffing changes, the background of the new leader, or the competitive landscape. For example, human capital and social capital are crucial elements in post-transition success (Lee & Tsai, 2024, p. 628). The new leader may bring their own executive team at the cost of internal human resources. This can further the unease from the transitioning out of the current beloved leader. The next area of concern arises with a possible open door to "competitor attacks" (p. 634) surfacing as an unintended consequence of CEO changes. For churches, this would be akin to other houses of worship capitalizing on the disruption of a church under a leadership transition. A third element Lee and Tsai deemed significant was that of the insider versus outsider successor and how it can impact the strategic direction of the organization (p. 628). Similarly, Dollhopf and Scheitle mentioned the successor's origin (internal or external), but added organizational context and culture as influencers in leadership transitions (p. 679). Like most corporate successions, churches see transitions as an event, possibly like a light on-and-off switch rather than a dimmer switch. Turning the lights on and off are "abrupt and obvious;" successions should be more of a deliberate and conscientious "dimming down" and "brightening up" (Jethani, 2005, p. 52).

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Greenleaf (1977) proposed that the reason for the existence of "all human organizations" is to serve (p. 91). With respect to leadership, he promoted the idea that the desire to serve emerges first, then the desire to lead (p. 5). For Greenleaf (1979), servant leaders serve their people, help them dream bigger, aim higher, stand taller, and strive to serve others (p. 92). Eva et al. (2019) found that servant leaders are sometimes seen as trustees responsible for cultivating and growing the organization's people and resources (p. 114). For Contreras (2016), servant leadership is a "moral and inspirational" model that is a strategic need for organizations today, and a way through which organizations can achieve their strategic and social goals (p. 22). A strategic goal of organizations is planning for the future and should include succession. However, as the data indicates, secular and spiritual organizations struggle with succession planning (Vanderbloemen and Bird, 2020).

Currently, the literature lacks sufficient data on the topic of successful transitions (Siambi, 2022) or on data providing a defined path toward smoother transitions. There is an absence of recommendations to address the concerns, issues, and obstacles that are present before, during, and post transitions. Whether by commission or omission, the current literature on transition fails to answer the questions of how leaders and congregations should prepare for their successors and how successors should be

empowered to continue the ministerial mission. With the added focus on the success of servant leadership, the question arises as to whether they are better at planning succession than other types of leaders. These questions are the gaps and limitations in the literature. While there is research discussing the challenges and providing guidance and biblical analyses to inform the transitions, the theoretical and practical answers as to how to prepare predecessors and successors for successful transitions with minimal conflict, chaos, and risks remain an open quandary.

ALL PASTORS ARE TEMPORARY PASTORS

Olusegun (2021) underlined the inevitability of leadership succession for every organization (p.107). The fact is that all pastors will retire. Most pastoral transitions occur by happenstance, and 90% of the 480,000 expected pastoral transitions over the next 10 years do not have a succession plan (Expand Consulting Partners, 2024). Watkins (2003) cautioned that during times of transition, small actions can impact results much more than usual. While Ciampa and Watkins (1999) reminded organizations to be mindful of the loitering spirit of past leaders. Therefore, the discussions from this exegetical analysis can provide noteworthy insight for ministry leaders starting out in their careers, mid-career professionals, and those planning to transition soon.

Transitions by their very nature are disruptive (Ballinger & Marcel, 2010) and require close collaboration between the predecessor and successor (Ciampa & Watkins, 1999). Rarely does the “Spirit of Elijah” inhabit the successor (Elisha) as it did in 2 Kings 15, and seldom has there been a leadership style and direction like that of these two men (Klem, 2023). Although there is not a one-strategy-fits-all approach, this exegetical investigation can help lay the foundation for additional research and provide guidance for a godly servant leadership transition process. This exegetical analysis examines the current research and biblical texts on the leadership transitions of Moses and Joshua (Num. 27:18–20) and Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2:12–14) to offer guidance on planned successions.

SUCCESSION PLANNING GAP

The literature on succession planning discusses the lack of planning for a succession, the availability of leaders for succession, the decisions about internal versus external successors, and pre-succession preparation. Where succession planning guidance is provided, the guidance focuses on overtly high-level approaches, missing the practical nuances required to ensure a proper and godly transition of power and authority from one generation to the next.

The research suggests that preparing for the next leader is a challenge for both secular and faith-based organizations (Sanou, 2021, p. 28); and that although most senior leaders believe that succession planning is important, very few do it (Adkins, 2017; Barna, 2023; Ciampa et al., 1999; Hunter & Decker-Pierce, 2021; Sanou, 2021, p. 32; Vanderbloemen & Bird, 2020).

Exploring organizational planning, Hunter & Decker-Pierce (2021) found that only 45% of boards had a replacement in development, 28% were internal promotions, and 19% of the successions were the result of a planned retirement (p. 38). Vanderbloemen

and Bird (2020) stated that senior leaders need to recognize “that there is no success without a successor. No one wins when transitions don't go well” (p. 39). Dollhopf and Scheitle (2013) stated that a misunderstood fact of transitions is that “the impact... is often felt before the transition even occurs” (p. 676); actions during transition tend to produce “disproportionate results” (p. 676), and conflict “can be both cause and effect of congregational leadership transition” (p. 678). Dollhopf and Scheitle’s investigation made several key contributions regarding decisions around internal versus external or male versus female candidates. First, they found that an external leader may be “a less polarizing force” and receive more grace than an internal leader who may face higher expectations (p. 693). Vanderbloemen and Bird (2020) also mentioned support for an external successor: “One trend we've noticed is that the right person to succeed is often the one who has been prepared elsewhere” (p. 36). The choice of an internal candidate when accompanied by the current leader continuing as a member of the congregation can also lead to transitional issues (Dollhopf & Scheitle, 2013, p. 693) and issues from the “ghosts of leaders past” (Ciampa & Watkins, 1999). Next, they found that gender can result in greater conflict; specifically, female leaders faced more conflict than their male counterparts. Finally, the short-term decline and shifts in the size of the congregation were not meaningful, and their effects dissipated over the long term.

Another issue with succession planning is the availability of successors to choose from. Johnson (2022) compared succession planning to buying life insurance, as it is rare for someone to enjoy the process of buying life insurance or the reason for it. In this study, Johnson looked at the reasons for the impending “exodus” of nonprofit organization executives (NPOs): retirements, job transitions, burnout, or remote work (p. 3). These reasons, plus the need for higher wages and for operational improvements, were also echoed by Rendon (2022). Johnson stated that organizations need to understand the issues around the necessity for succession planning and the importance of a leadership development program. While organizations may perceive leadership development as a luxury, it is a necessity that requires business funding (p. 3). NPOs ought to face succession processes and decisions head-on; decisions such as internal versus external candidates, leadership development, and succession goals (p. 3). Next, boards, HR departments, and current executives should work collaboratively to define roles and responsibilities among them, allocate resources toward leadership development and mentoring, discuss succession strategies, assign tasks with owners, and create processes. Johnson’s recommendations provide useful guidance for the role of the three bodies (HR, executive, board) and elements necessary for succession, which lead to a discussion about the role of the board.

Stewart et al. (2021) stated that a wealth of information exists on the practice of how successful transitions should be executed, but little attention is paid to the role of the board (p. 527). The existing research demonstrates the need for boards to do more; currently, 75% of board members do not complete the best practices found in the literature (p. 540).

Lovelace’s (2014) review of an effective pastoral succession in California was grounded in the letter of the Apostle Paul to Timothy, where Paul carefully instructs his pastoral apprentice that the gospel and the testimony of Jesus Christ must continue beyond his imminent physical departure. Paul embraces the idea that his ministerial assignment includes that of assuring a continuity and perpetuation of the church’s

teachings. Paul addresses the need for faithfulness, sustainability, and impartation (p. 258).

Paul is a biblical example of a servant leader. In this assessment, Lovelace uses Paul's analogies of the good soldier, the athlete, and the farmer (p. 259–260). With the soldier analogy, Lovelace makes the case that Paul wanted Timothy to be prepared for war and to be responsive to God's authority and the legacy of his predecessor. With the athlete, Paul wanted Timothy to care for his own physical health, the health of his team, to foster a team environment, and to understand the strategies that lead to successful team outcomes (p. 259). Using the farmer analogy, Lovelace claims that Paul's intention was to "embrace the stewardship mantle of the farmer" with the responsibility to "sow for a future harvest," understanding that the product of the harvest benefits those beyond the church walls (p. 260). The process that Lovelace provides includes six phases: the Holy Spirit's affirmation of the new leader as in the laying on of hands (1 Tim. 5:2), confirmation that the candidate has been vetted, communication of the timeline and the process, edification of the relationship of the outgoing and the incoming leader, ratification of the new leader, and finally the celebration (p. 265–266). Lovelace states that through this process the congregation can emotionally detach from the old leader and celebrate the new one. Based on 1 Timothy 5:17–22, the objective is to honor the outgoing leader and the incoming pastor (p. 266). Through an analysis of the pastoral letters, and similar to Lovelace (2014), Hock (2006) explored succession planning from the perspective of the apostles (1 Tim. 1:9–10; 6:4–5; 2 Tim. 3:2–4; Titus 3:3). Via the admonitions in each letter regarding false teachers, sins, and ethics, Paul wanted his successors to be well equipped to combat false teachings and false teachers "with patience and competence" (p. 88). Paul wanted his successors to be authentic leaders who reflected on, taught, and exemplified Godly virtues (p. 98). Unlike Lovelace, Hock does not provide a process for a proper succession. The focus of this study was a more exegetical look at the pericope versus an exploration with the goal of finding a strong transition process.

In the book *The Succession Principle: How Leaders Make Leaders*, McKenna (2014) stated that the leaders' legacies "will be written not in the good things (they have) done as Christian leaders, but in the greater things that (their) successor will do" (p. 123). Martin (2024) promoted the idea that the leader's succession plan is his legacy. McFarlan (1999) stated that selecting a new chief executive officer (CEO) is the most important job of the board and that "simple formulas and standard practices don't always work" (p. 68). Sometimes an unconventional method such as cross-training along with the current leader and the second-in-command switching roles can lead to finding the perfect successor (p. 69). McFarlan's suggestion does not negate the need for succession planning and due process, but it can provide a solution to finding a successor for a volunteer board who may have limited abilities in the nonprofit area they serve.

Succession research suggests that there is a need for more guidance on practical transition planning. The current research only addresses the process from a high level or points to a general strategy that misses the intermingling role of the board, the responsibilities of the outgoing and the incoming leader, and duties of the congregation. Therefore, a close look at how servant leaders like Moses and Elijah

planned for their transitions may shed some light on this complex and often ignored topic.

MOSES' JOURNEY ENDS

During Moses' time, Israel had left Egypt, crossed the desert, and identified the Promised Land. It was now time to seize it. At this junction, Moses is around 120 years old. He had spent one third of his life enjoying the comforts of the palace; the second third of his life as a fugitive in the desert getting to know God from afar; the last 40 years sharing a very personal, intimate relationship with God, building the foundation for Israel's future and humanity's fate while earning his badge as God's chosen leader.

The last 40 years had been the toughest of Moses' life, but if asked, he might say that they were the best years of his life. He accomplished something he did not know was possible. This stuttering fugitive led God's people out of horrible multi-generational bondage and into freedom- training, equipping, and forming them in the process.

ELIJAH'S TIME IS UP

Elijah had completed his mission. He knew his time was up. He was pensive and refrained (2 Kings 2). A lot had happened to him and through him. His passion commandeered God's biggest moments despite his doubts and his flailing self-esteem. In his highs, he had seen God's glory and, in his lows, he felt God's love. Now, Elisha walks beside him attentive to his every move.

Martin (2024) suggested that part of the challenge of succession planning is the outgoing leader's loss of purpose, personal identity, and belonging to the community that has looked to him for leadership for many years. Ronald A. Heifetz believed that the fear of loss was the real fear and not the fear of change (Cormode, 2020).

An exegetical review of Numbers and 2 Kings may help highlight how neither change nor loss should be feared but embraced. Moses and Elijah not only accepted the end of their ministries but planned for it. They took ownership, closing their journey and helping their successor commence theirs.

EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS NUMBERS AND 2 KINGS

Texture Analysis Summary

An inner texture analysis of Numbers 27:18–20 (NIV) reveals the unique progression of Israel, a Hebrew nation, in the process of being birthed. The opening-middle-closing pattern begins with Moses and Eleazar the priest, preparing Joshua for the succession ceremony. In the opening (v. 18), God tells Moses how to perform the succession and installation ceremony. In the middle (v. 19), Joshua stands before the Priest and in front of the Israelites for the public anointing. The closing happens in verse 20, where the transition culminates with Moses' authority publicly transferred to Joshua.

A sensory aesthetic pattern is evident in the text in the form of phrases that express vibrant, palpable actions such as "the Lord said," "Take Joshua," "lay your hand on him," "have him stand before," "commission him," "give him." These action phrases

focus on the past (taking Joshua), the present (anointing Joshua), and direction for the future (Joshua leading the people).

Looking further at Numbers 27 through the intertexture lens, Moses, under God's direction, follows a public process that is intentional and methodical, and in line with his Hebrew heritage. Moses takes Joshua out from the group, places him in front of the priest and before the Israelites, lays his hands on Joshua, publicly commissions him, and transfers the authority necessary to be the next leader of Israel. The leadership transition was public, symbolic, and included all the rituals, garments, elements, and traditions of the time. For example, the laying on of hands was used during Moses' time for rituals including healing and ordination (Foakes-Jackson & Lake, 1954). Olusegun (2021) stated that Numbers 27:12–23 is a prototype for leadership transitions.

The succession process includes a laying on of hands by Moses. This laying on of hands represents the transfer of power from Moses to Joshua while Moses was still alive to forestall any doubt as to the legitimacy of Joshua's leadership among the people. This public investiture will give Joshua the authority to lead the people, and they will follow him in obedience. The use of "of your authority" in verse 20 suggests a release of Moses' weight, power, splendor, or authority on Joshua, which enables him to lead the people successfully.

Through a sacred texture analysis, God's role is revealed as the process proceeds to describe Joshua as a man who had "the spirit of leadership" or the *Ruach HaKodesh*, the "Spirit of the Holy One" (Num. 27:18, *Orthodox Jewish Bible*, 2002). As mentioned in the intertexture analysis, there is divine history in the laying on of the hands, commissioning, and transfer of authority. Joshua's commitment shows up as the aspect of human commitment prevalent in sacred texture analysis.

In 2 Kings 2, a different but similar transition process takes place. Elijah is publicly removed from earth; his cloak, similar to and symbolic of the royal robes of kings, falls and ends up in the hands of Elisha. As Elisha assumes his predecessor's authority, Elisha stands at the bank of the Jordan River performing a similar miracle to Elijah. The conclusion of this event with the crossing over completes the transition of power, and the acceptance of authority marks the beginning of Elisha's ministry.

An analysis of the words describes constant movement: "walking," "talking together," "suddenly," "separated," "saw," "cried," "took," "tore," "picked up," "went back," "asked," "struck," and "crossed over" (2 Kings 2:11–14, *New International Version*, 2011). Within the descriptors and action phrases, there is a more familial relationship that emerges in the way that Elisha cries out upon Elijah's removal, "my father my father" (2 Kings 2:12). The focus of the pericope is the public and extraordinary removal of the current leader and the transition of the new leader. The cloak of the current leader (Elijah) falls from the sky (heaven is the place of ministerial selection) and is caught by Elisha (the new Elijah for that generation). To continue the ministry and with the cloak in hand, Elisha performs a similar miracle to Elijah and parts the waters.

There are certain things here that differ from the transition in Numbers. In these verses, there is a conversation between Elijah and Elisha. No conversation is referenced in Numbers. The taking up of Elijah is described as "sudden," although the text suggests that it was expected. While no "assembly" of people is apparent in these verses, the prior and following verses mention the 50 prophets nearby.

The sacred texture analysis of 2 Kings does not mention God (deity) or a spirit being, but God's presence and his Spirit are evident in the chariots of fire, horses of fire, the whirlwind, and the act of rapturing Elijah (2 Kings 2:11–14). Looking at the Holy Person perspective, Elijah emerges as the prophet working on God's behalf with Elisha as the prophet in waiting. The divine history is found in the symbolic process of using the cloak to validate Elisha's leadership and in the parting of the Jordan River. Elisha's human commitment is demonstrated through his consistency in walking and talking with Elijah, keeping an eye out for his rapture, taking the cloak, and parting the waters. Here again, since there was no "assembly" or religious community presented in the text, the verses prior to and post the pericope chosen reference 50 prophets nearby.

Key Information from the Biblical Passages

Several things stand out from both succession stories. In Numbers, Moses has a defined, structured, and ordered process for presenting the successor, demonstrating that Joshua was chosen, and then transferring to him the authority that Moses had. The process was done in the presence of God, the priest, and the people: "Moses . . . decided that it was time for him to begin relinquishing power to a successor, and he asked for one, making sure that he did all that is necessary to transfer leadership to this successor" (Olusegun, 2021). Rather than desiring to hold on to power, Moses wanted the transfer of power to happen. As a servant leader, Moses was focused on his people and God's mission, and not himself.

In the story of Elijah and Elisha, a similar process takes place. While it does not appear to be as structured and ordered as compared to Moses and Joshua, there is a structure and an order to the succession. Elijah's departure is known and expected, although no one is talking about it. The text states that Elijah and Elisha are "walking and talking together" shortly before the transition process begins. The transition officially begins when "a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them" (2 Kings 2:11). The chariots appear with the purpose of removing Elijah: "Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind." This taking-up begins with the public, supernatural, and extraordinary changeover. While Elisha is startled by the chariots, horses, fire, and the whirlwind, the surprise is not due to the transition process. Elijah had reiterated to Elisha the need to witness the removal to receive the answer to the double-portion request. Now, the time had come, and the changeover was taking place in a very supernatural manner. As this is happening, Elijah's cloak falls from heaven, and Elisha grabs it. The text then states that "Elisha saw him no more." Here, the transition process ends, signaling the culmination of the public ministry of Elijah. The void left by Elijah is ready to be filled by his successor.

Klem's (2023) analysis of the transition of Elijah to Elisha reveals a structural pattern in the form of "a loyalty test in a prophetic succession." Elijah asks Elisha to stay behind, and the successor refuses. The script is flipped when Elisha asks Elijah for a double portion (2 Kings 2:9–10), which he gets upon Elijah's removal.

While Elijah's transition is more extraordinary in execution than what is presented in Numbers between Moses and Joshua, it follows a similar pattern and sequence. Elisha is chosen publicly, cloaked publicly, and rewarded with the first public miracle after the "anointing" as successor. Joshua is anointed publicly, validated publicly by the

priest, accepted as the successor publicly, and ready to take the Promised Land after his official installation.

Interpretation Support

Sanou (2021) stated that whether "planned or unplanned, changes in the organizational, societal, or political landscape are an ever-present, unavoidable reality" (p. 29). Lovelace (2014) further affirmed the need for a strong plan as the best way to ensure a successful transition (p. 260). Moses was keenly aware of the limited time remaining. The clock was winding down; Israel has left its bondage behind and the entrance to the Promised Land draws near. Moses is intentional about identifying the successor. Lovelace (2014) stated that the "understudy . . . must be willing to assume the discipline of a soldier . . . (and accept) a position of submission to the One (God) who has called those to serve" (p. 259). In Numbers, Joshua was the understudy and a soldier. Through a process of years, as a servant leader, Moses invested time and resources into developing Joshua and included him in key moments of the Israelites' journey (Adkins, 2017, p. 2). Moses was deliberate about the process from an operational standpoint and from the spectrum of power transfer. Elijah was also deliberate about the transition. When the younger leader asks Elijah for double anointing, as a servant leader, Elijah patiently provides the answer to Elisha's query. Klem (2023) stated that Elisha must "be tenacious in staying with Elijah to the end" to complete the transition (p. 517). There is an action that Elisha needs to take for his request to be fulfilled. Adkins (2017) stated that the legacy of the leader is dependent not on the success of the organization or ministry led, but on "the quality of those you develop and your ability to transition out of your role . . . with little drama or disruption" (p. 3). Of the various leadership styles, developing leaders is a focus of servant leadership. When a transition is properly planned, it will undergo several iterations through implementation to achieve the desired outcome (Sanou, 2021, p. 29). Both Moses and Elijah achieved their desired outcomes and fulfilled God's plan.

LESSONS LEARNED

There are several lessons learned from this exegetical analysis that serve as advice for proper succession planning. The first lesson is that both transitions were planned; there was a request from the current leader for a successor (1 Kings 19:14–17; Num. 27:15–17). There was also a God-ordained planning process followed by the current leaders. Chen (2024) mentioned that emotional attachment and the fear of losing control are two reasons for the lack of succession planning. Similarly, Martin (2024) suggested that part of the challenge of succession planning is the outgoing leader's loss of purpose, personal identity, and belonging, while Heifetz believed that the fear of loss was the real fear and not the fear of change (Cormode, 2020). These fears may be less common in servant leaders who are others-focused. Ogden and Wood (2008) stated that beliefs about "personality, ego, power, and... mortality" hinder succession planning. Neither of these two reasons nor the beliefs mentioned by Ogden and Wood appear in the books of Numbers or 2 Kings. Moses and Elijah understood their purpose, their mortality, and the need to train a successor. As servant leaders, they knew that change was "an ever-present, unavoidable reality" (Sanou, 2021, p.29)

that required a transition plan that was well prepared for it to achieve the needed result (Lovelace, 2014, p. 260)—a leader to succeed them.

The second lesson is that both transitions were organized, structured, and deliberate. While the account in Numbers appears to be intentional and structured from the description of the sequential process and ceremonial elements, and the account in 2 Kings appears to be haphazard from the spectacular air and lights show of the fiery horses, the fiery chariot, and the whirlwind sweeping up Elijah, the exegetical texture analysis demonstrates that both are consistently planned and organized in diverse ways, and that both followed a similar sequence. In Numbers, Moses followed a defined process provided by God; in 2 Kings, God swept up Elijah. In one account, the human is leading the transition; in the other account, God himself separates the current leader from the incoming one. What can appear to the casual observer as unplanned, through an exegetical analysis can be revealed as planned and intentional. An additional clue to the establishment of a succession plan is that the successors had been identified. Moses knew that Joshua would lead the people into the Promised Land (Num. 27:18) and Elijah knew that Elisha would continue the ministry (2 Kings 2:3). In both accounts, there was a leadership void and a trained servant leader equipped to fill the void.

Third, is that the successors were prepared for the transition process. Sanou (2021) stated that ill-planned or unplanned successions produce “devastating consequences” and end with the “ill-preparedness of up-and-comers” (p. 29). Lovelace (2014) reiterated the need for transition planning, citing the Apostle Paul’s words that the “testimony of Jesus Christ must continue beyond his imminent physical departure.” To further support the biblical imperative for succession planning, Lovelace also echoed Jesus’ charge in Matthew 28:19–20 for disciples to continue making disciples, alluding to the perpetual need for leading, leadership, and leadership formation (p. 258). Both successors accepted the call (Ex. 33:11; Deut. 34:9; 1 Kings 19:19–21) and underwent a process of mentoring and training to prepare for their future leadership (Deut. 3:28; 2 Kings 2:1–11). Elisha was able to succeed Elijah because his leader had trained him to do so (Olusegun, 2021). The same mentoring happened with Joshua. Joshua and Elisha came to the “ceremony” ready and by their own volition. Without their willing participation, the transition process could not have taken place. Without their servant leaders’ investments, their transitions would have failed.

A fourth lesson can be found in the similarities of the location and the conditions of the transitions. They both occurred in the desert and in public. Both occurred during demanding political and economic times. Both occurred at the “entrance” or at the “bank” of a miracle. Both required a heading-forward or crossing-over into another land. Both signaled an end of one era and the beginning of the next. Both transitions were public. There was a proper transfer of power and authority. In one instance, there was the vital and final exit of the current leader with the completion of the journey for the Israelites, while in the other, there was the continuation of the ministry. In both instances, there was not a leader hanging around to fuel the “ghost of leaders past” (Ciampa & Watkins, 1999).

The public nature of the events also supports the followers’ awareness and endorsement of the incoming leader. Neither transition appeared to be a surprise to the Israelites nor to the school of prophets. From the sequence of events, it can be deduced that the followers were aware of the succession plan, as they were aware of the

planned successor. For pastors, this points to the need for the congregation to be aware of the upcoming transition plan.

Another key lesson hidden in the text is the resulting peaceful transition of power. Sanou (2021) stated the absence of a strong succession plan for a senior leader's departure can "trigger a chain of power struggles" between other internal leaders who believe that they are good contenders for the upcoming leadership opportunity (p. 30). In the case of Joshua, there were a potential between 78,600 and 262,000 (Ex. 18:20–27; Deut. 1:9–18; Num. 26:51) acting leaders among the Israelites who could have entertained the idea and lobbied for the position of succeeding Moses (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Israel's Leadership Structure Under Moses

LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

Hierarchy= Steep pyramid

Moses and Jethro Ex. 18:20-27; Dt 1:9-18; Num. 26:51= 601,730

Leadership structure advice

Divide into 10s, 50s, 100s, 1,000s

SCENARIO 1

LEADERS

Population size- Men, women, and children **2,000,000**

$(2,000,000/10)+(2,000,000/50)+(2,000,000/100)+(2,000,000/1,000)$ **262,000**

Population size- Men, women, and children **1,000,000**

$(1,000,000/10)+(1,000,000/50)+(1,000,000/100)+(1,000,000/1,000)$ **131,000**

Population Size- Men only? **600,000**

$(600,000/10)+(600,000/50)+(600,000/100)+(600,000/1000)$ **78,600**

SCENARIO 2 TWELVE TRIBES

Population size- Men, women, and children **2,000,000**

$(2,000,000/12)= 166,667$

$(166667/10)+(166667/50)+(166667/100)+(166667/1,000)$ **21,833**

X Twelve Tribes **262,001**

Population size- Men, women, and children **1,000,000**

$(1,000,000/12)= 83,334$

$(83334/10)+(83334/50)+(83334/100)+(83334/1,000)$ **10,917**

X Twelve Tribes **131,002**

Population Size- Men only? **600,000**

$(600,000/12)= 50,000$

$(50,000/10)+(50,000/50)+(50,000/100)+(50,000/1000)$ **6,550**

X Twelve Tribes **78,600**

In the case of Elijah, outside of Elisha, there were at least 50 prophets under his guidance (2 Kings 2:3, 5, 7, 15, 17). A key insight into the power struggles that could have occurred with Elijah can be deduced from the fact that Elisha was chosen to be part of Elijah's ministry as an outsider (1 Kings 19:19–21). Elisha was not part of the school of prophets. This is akin to an external hire. When he was chosen, Elisha, "was plowing with twelve yokes of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair" (1 Kings 19:19). Since Scripture does not mention a revolt by any of the leaders in the assembly or that the leaders were questioned about their successors, the assumption is that this was a planned, executed, and God-ordained succession process.

IMPLICATIONS

The aim of this analysis is to explore the query as to whether servant leaders are better at planning their successions versus other types of leaders. Using Moses and Elijah as servant leader models, this exegetical analysis provides several implications for pastors and ministry leaders. First, it is a reminder that all pastors are "interim pastors" (Adkins, 2017) who retire (Vanderbloemen & Bird, 2020, p. 31), and that leadership succession is an "unavoidable reality" (Sanou, 2021, p. 29), inevitable (Olusegun, 2021, p. 107) and a fact (Adkins, 2017). Moses and Elijah had a clear start and stop to their respective ministries. As great as they were, and as irreplaceable as people may have believed them to be, they were human and mortal.

The next implication is that there needs to be intentional planning with time and resources allocated to the preparation of the leadership succession plan. Leaders should prioritize training the next generation, prevent ministerial silos, and work collaboratively in faith formation so that the Spirit of the Lord can lead the incoming generation to do God's work after the leader's departure (Martin, 2024). There also needs to be an identification of the key stakeholders and their roles in the transition planning, execution, and sustainability process. The current leader, the stakeholders, and the incoming leader need to be conscious of the idea that the pastor is rooted in the hearts and minds of the congregation and embedded in the soul of community in ways that are hard to explain, difficult to assess, and complex to separate when the time for succession has arrived. Leaders and stakeholders do well to remember that a misunderstood fact of transitions is that "the impact . . . is often felt before the transition even occurs" (Dollhopf & Scheitle, 2013, p. 676); actions during transition tend to produce "disproportionate results" (p. 676), and conflict "can be both cause and effect of congregational leadership transition" (p. 678). The "ghosts of leaders past" should also be a consideration during and after the transition period (Ciampa & Watkins, 1999).

Another implication is that there needs to be a public identification and endorsement of the successor followed by a public anointing, a public transfer of power, a public legitimization of that power, and a public exit of the outgoing leader. This should include the cultural rituals important to the organization. In Numbers, God provided Moses directions to a ceremony and a process that was important to the Israelites. In 2 Kings, God swept up Elijah in the company of the School of Prophets. In one account, the human is leading the transition; in the other account, God begins the transition process. In both accounts, ceremonial elements are used that are important and relevant to the "congregation."

CONCLUSION

Greenleaf (1977) proposed that “all human organizations” exist to serve and that the desire to serve emerges first, then the desire to lead (p. 5). Servant leaders serve their people, help them dream bigger, aim higher, stand taller, and strive to serve others (p. 92). Servant leaders are sometimes seen as trustees responsible for cultivating and growing the organization's people and resources (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114). Servant leadership is a “moral and inspirational” model that is a strategic need for organizations today, and a way through which organizations can achieve their strategic and social goals (Contreras, 2016, p. 22). Moses and Elijah were servant leaders whose focus was to fulfill God's plan through their calling and the employment of God's people in His service. Part of their call was to ensure continuity after their departure. Both prepared their successors in private and in public and empowered them to continue the ministerial mission.

This analysis aimed to explore the query as to whether servant leaders are better at planning their successions versus other types of leaders. This exegetical investigation into the successions of servant leaders like Moses and Elijah provides several lessons for the proper execution of today's ministerial and leadership transitions. The accounts demonstrate a prior leadership formation process followed by a public identification and endorsement of the successors, a public anointing, a public transfer of power, and a public legitimization of that power. This was followed by the public exit of the current leader. There were cultural rituals involved. The protagonists leading the process were different but influential and key to the succession and the legitimization of power and authority. In Numbers, God provided Moses directions; in 2 Kings, God swept up Elijah. In one account, the human is leading the transition; in the other account, God begins the transition process. Prevalent through both transitions is the fact that God works in diverse ways, but in an orderly manner, with intentionality, planning, and purpose. What can appear to the casual observer as unplanned or haphazard, through an exegetical analysis, can be revealed as planned and intentional. God occupied a key part in both succession plans, and God still has a role to play in the leadership successions of today's faith-based organizations.

There is not a lot of succession research specific to servant leaders (Siambi, 2022). What the literature is clear about is that servant leaders are not self-focused; rather, they find joy in the success of their teams. In Scripture, we see that Moses and Elijah were servant leaders who were people-focused and were intentional in training and mentoring their teams; qualities necessary for preparing successors to lead. These transitions suggest that servant leaders may be more prescient in planning for their succession. They also help expand the understanding about how leaders should prepare for their successors and how successors should be empowered to continue the ministerial mission. The processes of Moses and Joshua (Num. 27:18–20) and Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2:12–14) provide two different, structured transitions that demonstrate a strong process worthy to be duplicated today.

About the Author

Dr. Evelyn Cardenas is a multilingual professional with rich experience in the private for-profit and nonprofit sectors in North America, Europe, and Asia. She has led multimillion-dollar endeavors through multicultural, geographically dispersed teams in software development, engineering, and education. She has taught at the graduate level for over a decade in both secular and religious institutions. She has served in ministry for many years alongside her family. Her experience in leadership is both practical and theoretical. In her first PhD from Northcentral University, she contributed to the body of knowledge on marketing strategies to multicultural American consumers. In her second PhD from Southeastern University, she expanded the understanding of the dynamics of control in self-driven faith leaders who espouse belief in God Control.

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