



## Episode 032

# Insights on Succession with Ps Denis Lu

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**Ps Wilson:**

Hi. Welcome to wilsonlailing.com.

This is our leadership podcast and today we are really going to have an exciting time because we're going to have my dear friend Denis. Pastor Denis Lu. Denis is an international elder with Hope International Ministries. He serves together with me, and he's also the senior pastor of Hope Kuching. Hope Kuching is a large church in Sarawak, which is in Borneo. And it's really a church that's touching a lot of people in many different ways, and it's one of the large significant churches in Kuching in East Malaysia. So today we have this privilege of asking Ps Denis on the whole area of succession. Dennis, you have been now a pastor, the senior pastor for a number of years.

**How long have you been a pastor of Hope Kuching now?****Ps Denis:**

I've been pastoring since the year 2000, so I guess that's 23 years.

**Ps Wilson:**

**Wow. That's a very long time. Now, can you tell us a little bit about Hope Kuching? I mean, how large it is and or what sort of congregations it has? That kind of thing.**

**Ps Denis:**

Yeah. Maybe I just want to start from the beginning. We started in the house with three adults and two children back in 1992. Today we are about 800 plus. We have our English congregation, our Mandarin, our BM. BM stands for Bahasa Malaysia. And Iban, which is a tribal language. Then we have our university group. Our Hope Kids, we sort of look at them separately as well, and the Ablaze youth.



**Ps Wilson:**

Right. And you actually do meet in a couple of locations as well.

**Ps Denis:**

Yes, that's right.

**Ps Wilson:**

It's amazing. So it's really a very broad church that Ps Denis is leading. So that's truly wonderful. Now, I understand that you were not the founding pastor. But you were part of the earliest team and you were part of the earliest leadership.

**Ps Denis:**

Yes.

**Ps Wilson:**

So I know, I understand that sometimes it's a shift and a change for someone to succeed over another person.

**So can you share with us some of the challenges that you faced in being a successor to the founding pastor?**

**Ps Denis:**

Yes. I think that first of all it has to begin with my own outlook or my mindset. Where I always thought of myself as a good follower. Someone who supports someone else, you know? And I think I play that role very well. I never expected that I had to step up to that level. So I think my challenges are basically in three areas, which is also the paradigm or the framework that I work with for myself and even to encourage other leaders, which is to lead self, lead others and lead organizations.



So I found that I was very challenged in all three areas when I became the lead pastor. Because in terms of leading self, I think I was not confident. I mean I was willing to serve, but I wasn't confident that I should be the lead person for the church.

And for leading others I think the challenge was I was part of the team, and we were just supporting Ps Simon, who was the pastor before me. And so the dynamics of the teamwork has always been gravitating around Ps Simon. So when I was put as a lead pastor, I didn't have the history of working as a lead for the other team members. They were my peers. I felt that they were better than me in the different giftings and strengths, and I was really wrestling with this idea of how do I lead my peers? They were my peers. Now I feel so uncomfortable to be in the lead position. On top of that, to lead the organization. Hope Kuching at that time, I realized that pastoring a church that is growing is not just about having a heart to care for people. I had to sort of learn to be a generalist in terms of knowing a little bit about finance, about management, about human relationships, human relations, HR and so on and so on.

**Ps Wilson:**

I guess it was a challenge that was put upon you suddenly too, because I know the history where Pastor Simon went to take over Hope KL. It was a very fast change, so I guess there wasn't much of a lead time for you to get used to the fact or even begin to prepare yourself. So I can understand the dilemma that you were faced with.

**Ps Denis:**

Yeah. But the good thing there was that I think God has his timing because I think about a year or two before that, I did tell Pastor Simon that, "Pastor, you know one day, if you need me to quit my job and go full-time, I'm ready. You just say the word and it's okay with me." And during that two year period, I began to pray because I felt a stirring in my heart that maybe my heart is towards serving God full-time. But I did not tell Ps Simon, I just prayed. And it turns out that when God gave me an answer it worked out exactly to be the timeframe. So although it was sudden, I was not surprised. Because I could see the convergence of what God told me and what my leader told me. That helped a lot.



**Ps Wilson:**

Yes that's amazing. God is always good in getting involved in such situations. Having experienced some of those things, what will be some of the advice you might give to others who might be in the position where they're becoming aware that they might become a successor soon.

**What sort of advice would you give to them?****Ps Denis:**

They would know that they're heading that direction?

**Ps Wilson:**

Yes. If they were aware or like you said, there's convergence showing. It's evident. It's coming towards that.

**What advice would you give to them?****Ps Denis:**

My advice would be that you need to have some basic roadmap of how to take the next step to transition. And again, I would use the same framework of leading self, leading others, leading organizations. And to identify your own strengths and weaknesses in all those three areas. And of course, it's not overnight, it's more like a process of reflection. And I do a lot of journaling. I do a lot of reflection, journaling on myself in terms of my own leadership. On how I did in leading people, or how was it when I led the church or certain meetings. So having that constant cycle of reflection and learning and saying, okay, how can I do better the next time round? That really helps a lot first of all.

Secondly, I will say that conviction, conviction that it is God who leads, and God is the one who's bringing a person into that position. I think of it this way: I responded for the general calling - the Great Commission. It was not like God is calling me to be a preacher or whatever, but I'm just responding like I believe the Great Commission is really the way to go.



And as I responded to that general calling, God began to lead me to see where I fit in that big picture according to my context, which was in Kuching, according to maybe my own personality and passion and giftings and so on.

**Ps Wilson:**

I can also say that from my own experience because as many of you know, I'm currently the president of HIM. And I had the opportunity to serve with Pastor Simon for about 10 years. And in that period of time, I was basically learning the ropes. I was watching how he functioned, how he made decisions and helped me. And like you said too, God prepared my heart. Because as I began to seek the Lord, God began to prompt in me and said, you're going to be taking over that role you know? And that helped me. Even in the midst of, there were uncertainties about the future and so forth, but it really helped me to say, okay, I got to be ready for this.

**What advice would you then give to someone who is the top leader and is looking forward to passing it on to a successor? What might be some of the things this leader could do or ought to do to smoothen the process?**

**Ps Denis:**

Right. I think that's a very good question because number one, we need to help the person realize that they do not need to fill in the big shoes of the lead pastor. Just as in my case, I would say that I had to learn to be at peace with myself that I am not like Ps Simon. And I had to find my own rhythm, my own way of leading which is quite different and be okay with that. And so I would say to such a person who has been preparing for this role, first of all is to praise God, you know, thank God for you for stepping up. And then I would say that it's important to have time to expose the incoming leader to working with the current team. And to encourage them to foster good working dynamics and relationships because every new leader will bring a new dynamic to the team. It might be the same core team, but the working relationship, the chemistry, the way of working - the earlier that the team knows how to work together with the incoming leader the better it is. And they have time to work out the some of the chinks and you know, the hiccups and so on.



And it helps if the outgoing pastor or the leader will facilitate those dynamics while he or she is around, to encourage them to work together more. And maybe also to take a step back to be more of a coach or a mentor to help them in that season.

**Ps Wilson:**

I think those are wonderful tips. I'm learning myself in my church as well. I'm already working with the successor and one of the things we do is those sort of things where a lot of the major decisions we are making are done together, both of us. Because I said to him, I don't want to do something where you don't have convictions about, because I would like to know that what we initiate or are working on you will continue. So I don't want to make a decision that I know in four years you will throw out, or five years or whatever it is. It's, you know, not the best. So it is a challenge. But yeah, I think those are really good tips to help them. What about now, just if we shift things a little bit. You know, we've been talking about the top leader and succession. What about at lower levels of leadership? You know, it might be say a unit leader, subdistrict or head of a ministry or department.

**What are some tips you might give to them also about succession planning and so forth?**

**Ps Denis:**

I was thinking about this question, and maybe I will start with the concept of how I view church across the different levels whether it's subdistrict, unit, life group. And that is we are a family. And I would think of it as a unit or life group setting. Where it is like encouraging. So I will not even say succession in a sense, as much as encouraging the different ones in life group or the unit to grow and mature and then they can branch off to lead new groups and so on. A bit more like a family setup, where the children grow up. It is terrible if the father and mother are still sort of holding the family together, taking care of all their needs when they're in their seventies, because that means that we have failed. And so likewise, I think that whether at the life group or unit level, we should view the people in the group as like our children. And help them to find their giftings, their calling and give them confidence and support so that eventually they would move out the house, get married and have children.





So I would say that succession to me is seeing more of the people in our groups rising up and leading respectively in different things that God has for them.

**Ps Wilson:**

And I guess also, succession can be in a different way because people can move sideways. Let's say someone's in charge of children's ministry. And in the future, you might move them across to family ministry and vice versa even. So I guess people have the mentality that wherever would be best available to God and his kingdom that would be a great thing. And we don't have to be stuck with the titles, say, I'm in charge of the worship department and this is me.

**Ps Denis:**

I think this is a very good point Ps Wilson, I think sometimes the challenge for us is if we look at the church structure as a hierarchical structure and there's an implicit idea that when you are at this position, you are..

**Ps Wilson:**

.. advanced in your career or something like that.

**Ps Denis:**

It is not a career advancement. I will still go back to the family concept where if I were a life group leader and some of my life group members have grown up to be even better than me as a unit leader, or they are going to pioneer something else, or serve in different ministries, it will be my greatest joy. So I think to me that is a beautiful picture of how we should look at succession planning. More like a family, seeing the children being successful.



**Ps Wilson:**

Amen. And I guess it gives the leadership the possibility of putting the right people in the right place because people are willing to say, I'm willing to play a different role. And we can say, now if we rearrange things, we can have a far better overall outcome when people are willing to take different roles.

**Ps Denis:**

Yes. That's right.

**Ps Wilson :**

Great. Well, thank you so much Denis, for your insights sharing with us your experience. It's so wonderful to have you with us.

## Discussion Questions

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These questions could be done personally or as part of a group discussion.

1. What impacted you the most from Ps. Denis sharing? Why?
2. Ps. Denis identified 3 key leadership areas that we need to deal with. Lead self, lead others and lead organization. What are your thoughts about the importance of all 3 areas? Why?
3. Ps. Denis shared about the importance of conviction in God about moving into a new and greater leadership role. How important do you think that is? Why?





## Actionable Steps

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Following questions are to prompt us on suitable actions. Importantly, come up with steps you will take to make progress. Give them datelines and priority.

1. Can you identify what your key strengths and weaknesses are in the 3 main aspects of lead yourself, lead others and lead organisation? Then identify 3 of highest priority that you should work on in the next few months.
2. If you should be considering your successor, what are some key things you should begin to plan out? Make sure to consider a timeline as well.
3. If you are the successor or potential successor, what are some key aspects you should begin to consider? What are some steps you could take to prepare yourself?





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