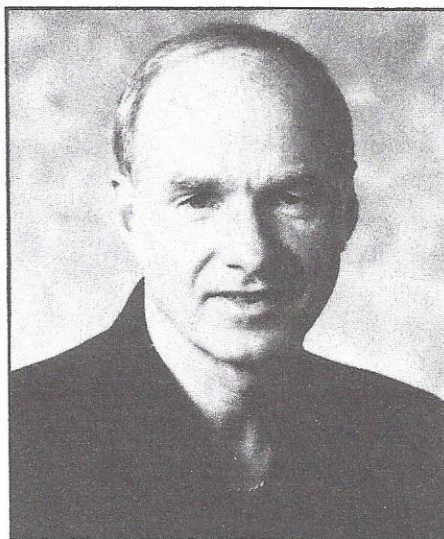


# How Do You Take Over From a Previous Pastor?

By Jamie Buckingham



Jamie Buckingham, senior minister at The Tabernacle Church, Melbourne, Florida, is one of the most widely read Christian writers of his generation. He is an award-winning magazine and newspaper columnist and has served in editorial positions for *Guideposts* magazine, *The National Courier* and *Logos Journal*. At present he is on the board of directors and is editor-at-large for both *Charisma* and *MINISTRIES* magazines, and an editorial consultant for Wycliffe Bible Translators. He has authored 33 books.

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**W**hen Admiral Larry Burkhart, commander of the nuclear submarine base in San Diego, recently turned over command to his replacement, he specified two things in the transition. First, he was totally detaching himself from the command, and second, he was making the transition with "full accountability."

In "detaching" himself from his old command, the admiral made it plain his replacement had full authority and would not have to answer, in any way, to the old commander. The new commander was now free to lead as he chose without having to live under the shadow of the previous leader.

In making the transition with "full accountability," however, Admiral Burkhart accepted full responsibility for anything which carried over from his command to the new era.

This latter concept is the same one used in baseball when a relief pitcher enters a game to replace a starter (or another reliever). At this time a definite set of rules comes into play which governs the transition. These rules are designed so the relief pitcher does not have to pay for the mistakes of his predecessor.

Let's say, for instance, it is the bottom of the ninth inning. The score is 3-1 in favor of the visiting team. The home team is at bat. The pitcher for the visiting team has loaded the bases and the manager decides to replace him with a pitcher from the bullpen. The next man up hits a double, scoring three runs and the home team wins. The loss is not charged to the relief pitcher, however, but to the former pitcher who put all those men on the bases. Not only that, the runs scored are counted against the starting pitcher's ERA (earned run average), not against the relief pitcher's record.

The interesting part of this is the rules are understood by the owner of the team, the manager and the fans.

Unfortunately, most new pastors do not fare as well as relief pitchers. Perhaps it is because the former pastor has not made it plain he is making the transition with "full accountability," or (and this is more likely)

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because most of today's churches simply don't have the proper ground rules to govern the transition.

The contemporary church can learn much from the practice of the "change of command" used by both military commanders and baseball pitchers. While the need is most evident in the multitude of independent churches around the nation, the principles also apply to those denominational churches who, although they may have set rules which govern transitions, often have difficulties with official boards as well as fickle fans in the congregation.

A survey of today's independent churches quickly reveals that almost none is designed to cope with the change of command. It seems the pastor (who is often the founder, i.e., a starting pitcher who also owns a major share of the stock) (1) expects to live forever, (2) believes Jesus will return before he has to leave, or (3) has some kind of spiritual nearsightedness which prevents him from thinking and planning ahead.

Churches, too, fall into this mentality. Many of them have been trained to believe in the doctrine of the pastor in perpetuity—sometimes called pastoral immortality. Thus if the pastor does die with his boots on, the church board panics and appoints his wife (the sentimental choice), the president of the local Full Gospel Business Mens' Fellowship (the political choice), or they call some hotshot evangelist hoping to give continued credibility to the church because he has been seen on Christian television.

The result is often a fiasco which brings dishonor to the kingdom of God.

It is not at all uncommon (although it is tragically sad) for good churches to split following the death or resignation of a pastor. Nor is it uncommon for the next pastor to encounter all sorts of unreasonable demands and expectations, or even to experience downright hostilities on the part of those who only months before loudly proclaimed he was God's man for the job. Many of these men—often good but naive men—are forced to leave under unpleasant circumstances which are not of their creation.

On the other hand, sometimes it is the relief pastor who actually leads (or inherits) the split. At other times the split occurs, or the relief pastor is chased from the pulpit by the T and F Committee (Tar and Feathers bunch), because he has acted unwisely out of immaturity or ignorance.

There are numerous instances of churches which had long-time pastors and called good successors who were able to build successfully on the work of the men they followed.

Succeeding a leader—either a good one or a bad one—is a difficult task. But it can be done, successfully, if the new pastor not only trusts God but assesses his new charge wisely. Basically, the new pastor will

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follow one of three types of leaders: the Authoritarian Leader, the Personality Pastor or the Failure.

In this chapter you'll learn what the new shepherd can expect when he inherits a flock where the sheep have been bullied, babied, or perhaps sheared and butchered by the previous leader.

When it comes to leadership this one point is certain: Someone is going to succeed everyone. But one of the toughest jobs is taking over from a man who had ruled with an iron hand.

The first problems the new leader has to deal with are those which will crop up among the subordinate leaders in the church. When the new pastor takes over he inherits not only his predecessor's accomplishments, but all the residual attitudes the subordinate leaders held toward the former pastor.

In an article in the *New York Times* Lorin Maazel told of what happened when he took over as music director of the Cleveland Orchestra, succeeding the legendary George Szell. Szell had used, according to Maazel, "The Toscanini method—you scream, insult, throw tantrums, put down, browbeat." Maazel added he didn't mean his predecessor was inhuman. But as a result of Szell's method of leadership, "there was this enormous resentment and love for the maestro."

Maazel's method of leadership was less authoritarian. Because of this the players were able to express more of their feelings with him. But this did not happen in the beginning. There were too many pent-up feelings from their years with Szell. These, as could be expected, were directed at their new leader.

"There was this sort of backwash of resentment," said Maazel, "and I think it took three or four years for this situation to cleanse itself in the collective psyche." Gradually, however, the members of the orchestra realized Maazel was a different type of leader. They began to relax. They even became cheerful. The result was a noticeable change in the orchestra's sound. According to Maazel, it became "looser and less fearful."

It is a perfect example of how a good leader was able to change an entire group to follow his own direction—through patience and hard work.

### **The Authoritarian Leader**

Since there are those who respond to an authoritarian leader, like Szell, by cringing in fear, a new pastor may find he has inherited a leadership which is inclined to view him with the same glasses they viewed their former leader. While they may have followed the former pastor obediently, at the same time they probably were afraid of him. As a result they may project hostility toward the new leader, which is nothing more than an outworking of the same posture they took with

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their predecessor—a posture of fear.

Many staff members like working for a strong pastor because they wish to be as strong as they think their leader is. Odd as it may seem, such people will allow their leader to abuse them, driving them to impossible feats, in hopes the leader will make them as strong as he is.

Remember what happened with Vince Lombardi at the Green Bay Packers. The players admired and respected him because they felt he was nearly perfect. Therefore they allowed him to train inadequacies out of them, hoping he would make them as powerful as he. But Lombardi's successors suffered sad fates at the hands of both team and fans until another head coach, Bart Starr, who was strong enough to cast his own shadow, emerged from the ranks.

Sometimes out of over-identification with such a leader, people become even more vicious to their subordinates than the leader is to them. We've seen this in radical discipleship groups where the disciples were much harder on their followers than their leader was on them.

But look what happens when the authoritarian pastor leaves. The entire church often falls apart. Subordinate leadership unravels at the seams. Elders and associate pastors vie for first in line in the pastoral pecking order. The pastor who follows such a leader sometimes winds up being as reviled by his followers as his predecessor was admired. Especially is this true if he is not equally authoritarian. He will be looked upon as weak and his subordinates will immediately challenge and test him. Some do this out of jealousy, feeling they are the rightful inheritor of the throne. (After all, they didn't suffer all those years under the whip just to take second place to an unproved outsider.)

Such ambition needs to be dealt with swiftly—before it destroys. Remember what Plutarch wrote of Julius Caesar: “ ‘It is not,’ said Caesar, ‘these well-fed, long-haired men that I fear, but the pale and the hungry-looking’; meaning Brutus and Cassius, by whose conspiracy he afterwards fell.”

Others in the church often will protest the new pastor every step of the way until he proves his methods of leadership are equal to or better than his predecessor. They will demand the kind of rigid over-control to which they are accustomed—again a reflection of their own inadequacies. They fear they will be overwhelmed by events without their strong leader. Or they fear the church simply cannot survive without an iron man at the helm. Only when they discover that their new shepherd is a person in his own right, one who is not frightened by them or the realities of his job, will they buckle down and respond to the new leadership.

Remember, though, because of the underlying sense of inadequacy which authoritarian leadership often breeds in subordinate leaders, such

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people will always be prone to making decisions before all the facts are in, to controlling action, and to contempt for their own subordinates which justifies their authoritarian action.

If you follow an iron-fisted boss and your method of leadership is not highly authoritarian, you should expect the behavior I've just described. You should expect to be challenged and tested.

How should you respond? Start by being firm. You don't have to be stern and severe, just strong enough to put boundaries around the testing behavior. Much of this depends on the way you see yourself. Ideally, your people will gradually come to recognize your strength, project less on to you and react less on the basis of those projections. You will have to reset yourself in a firm, consistent way in order to differentiate yourself from your predecessor, yet in a way which will reflect your own strength and confidence that it was God who called you to this position. It must be immediately obvious to all that you will not fear what man throws in your way. Remember, nearly all those who react out of hostility are not reacting against you—but against the pent-up anger and frustration so long felt toward their former leader. If you vacillate out of fear, guilt, anger or disappointment, you surely will dig a well into which your brothers may one day dump you before selling you to slave traders on their way to Egypt.

On the other hand, if you spend much time before the Lord, if you are secure in your call, if you do not fear the cross (or being fired for righteousness' sake), if you seek the wise counsel of those who were not overwhelmed by the former leader, if you make it a point to develop friends and to number yourself among the people rather than remain aloof and hard to reach, there is no reason God will not bless you with a long and prosperous ministry. When that happens, you will leave behind not the cowering, hostile sheep you inherited, but a mature body of able ministers eager to move on with the Lord.

### **The Personality Leader**

Few things are as traumatic for a church than to lose a leader—either a good one or a bad one. But to lose a man who has invested much or all of his life into a church, who has perhaps even founded it, is a grief experience akin to losing a husband, a father or an older brother.

Following such a man, the pastor who has led by the strength of his personality, presents a special set of problems. This is especially true if the man you are called to follow has been at the church a long time. In this case the church will have taken on much of the pastor's personality. To succeed him presents many of the same problems as might be encountered if you were to marry a woman recently widowed by the death of her deeply devoted husband—a man she had lived with

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nearly all her life.

In this case the problems are obvious. The first thing you see when you come in after the wedding are his children—and grandchildren—standing confused in the front yard, wondering whether to call you “Daddy” or just plain Fred.

The garage is filled with his garden tools. You hate gardening.

You see his fishing rods. You prefer tennis.

Inside you spot his picture in every room—most of them hugging his (now your) wife.

Upstairs his clothes are still in the closet—five sizes larger than your clothes.

Even though you are loved by your wife, every place you turn in this wonderful new situation you see “his” shadow.

But the longer you live in this new situation, the more you begin to understand that the former husband was not as perfect as you were led to believe. In moments of honesty your wife confides that he was not always faithful, that he had a cruel side, that he had secret perversions...and gradually you find you’re having to compete not only with the shadow of a slightly stained saint, but with hidden anger and deep hurts on the part of those he left behind.

So it often is when you dare occupy the pulpit formerly filled by a sainted patriarch. Such a pastor leaves a legacy: an established organization and a leadership tradition which often extends far beyond the local church. In short, you have a big job ahead just staying on the path, even if you don’t try to walk in his footprints.

The personality pastor tends to be paternalistic. He gives loving attention to his people. His people, in turn, love to obey, for the leader has developed a legend of which they are a part.

The personality pastor is highly respected, often beloved. Since he has been there a long time, or perhaps even founded the church, he is respected for his pioneer spirit. When anyone is loved this way, the church often represses its underlying negative feelings.

People tend to let the personality pastor get away with a lot of things a lesser man—say the one who comes in to replace the patriarch—could never hope to get away with. He is often granted extra favors, such as having the janitor wash his car, or being out of town weeks at a time, flying home only to preach on Sunday before taking off again for some outside ministry. He doesn’t have to go through proper channels like everyone else in the organization is expected to do. He may have a hidden expense allowance.

Sometimes what he gets away with is more than taking privileges; it might even be blatant sin. But because he is deeply loved, his people overlook it.

Don’t expect to follow such a man and have the same advantages.

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It will never happen. Such privileges are never inherited. And woe to the new pastor who demands them by saying, "But he operated this way—why not me?"

When the personality pastor leaves—for whatever reason—the people unconsciously feel deserted. Stuck with their unexpressed anger, they cannot let go. They are constantly wishing him back—even if he has died. When he does not return, they feel frustrated and may express their anger by "exposing" his weaknesses to his successor, or by taking out that anger on his successor. In nearly all cases, they will feel lost and helpless for a long time, feeling the master builder has gone and no one could ever really replace him.

Harry Levinson, a consultant expert to business executives, tells the story of the late Arthur Fiedler, famous conductor of Boston Pops orchestra. Fiedler was a musical legend. He fought great opposition to make the Boston Pops a famous institution. He would use children on stage, ride fire trucks through the streets of Boston, engage in public antics and hold huge outdoor concerts. He became the best loved man in all Boston. Yet in private he was an irritable, self-centered man—a trait known to only a few.

The same could be said of Fiorello La Guardia, who is the subject of a recent book. When mayor of New York during the years of World War II, he was one of the most loved men—not only in his city but in the nation. Known as the "Little Flower," he identified with the street sweepers, the firemen and the owner of the deli on the corner. He could often be found at the scene of the big fires in New York City, and when the newspapers went on strike he read the funny papers to the children over the city radio. Yet within he was insecure and often unable to make proper decisions. He governed by the strength of his personality.

Who can succeed a myth?

### **Replacing Personality Pastors**

Likewise in the church. To replace a personality pastor is tantamount to pulling down a sacred pedestal. The successor cannot help but be forever in the shadow of the great man. In fact, in some churches in the South, it used to be a common procedure to have the founding pastor literally entombed in a crypt in the vestibule (after he died, of course)—where he could always keep an eye on the ushers as they counted the morning offering. Can you imagine following such a pastor, whose body is in the vestibule, whose widow is on the second row, and whose legacy continues as law chipped in stone?

Harry Truman experienced this when he succeeded Franklin Roosevelt as president. Yet because Truman was strong in his own right, and because he was responsible for making some right decisions

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which put an end to a long war, he was soon acclaimed as one of our stronger presidents. This was helped, of course, by the fact a growing number of people in the nation felt Roosevelt had stayed in office too long.

The pastor who follows a personality pastor must walk a fine line. If he remains in the shadows, people will continue to live with the memory of the former pastor. In such a case the tenure of the successor will be brief. And if the new pastor tries to undo what his predecessor did, his short tenure will be spiced with hostility.

Yet it is possible to move into such a situation and establish a successful ministry—building on the good points of the former pastor's ministry and deviating where necessary. In fact, deviation is inevitable, for each pastor has his own style. Furthermore, since the Holy Spirit is always an instrument of change, change must be part of any leadership dynamic.

It is imperative, however, that the new pastor keep in mind that many of the church members will not see the change as directed by the Holy Spirit. Instead, they will view it as the impetuous action of an upstart pastor who is deliberately throwing off the old order in order to install his own program.

Therefore, I say to anyone stepping into such an awesome place—walk gently with your people.

How can you overcome such obstacles?

First, I suggest you gather all your key leaders and tell them that as much as their former pastor was loved, he is gone. You are not there to replace him, but you are there because God has called you and it has been confirmed by whoever confirms such calls (the elders, the congregation, the bishop, etc.). Tell them you intend to work slowly, but deliberately. There will be some re-grouping and some refocusing. And you anticipate, as you go along, a new vision will emerge—perhaps quite different from that of the former pastor.

Tell them also that it is appropriate to mourn the former pastor. But the finest memorial is to keep the church Christ-centered, not man-centered, and the best way to do that is to move forward under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as He directs the new shepherd.

At this point I would then announce one or two new programs—popular programs. Perhaps a Saturday morning men's breakfast, or a ladies' Bible study which you will teach. Give yourself to the people at the very beginning, and you will find them giving back—just as they did to their former pastor.

The second step is to ask those who report directly to you what kind of help they need to fulfill their responsibilities. Start asking them individually, meet with them as a group, and summarize your commitment to help them achieve their dreams also. But do not commit

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yourself to provide any specific requests at this time.

In a second round of individual visits, indicate what you can expect from each of them, then summarize for the group those responsibilities with which you are charged and with which you are charging them.

Finally, mix your elders' and staff's expectations with your own in a statement of transcendent purpose. From this you may draw goals and objectives, to give vision for the church and boundaries of what you expect and do not expect.

These steps will help in defining reality, making clear the nature of the loss of the previous pastor, and demonstrating your caring interest in those who report to you. It will also give you a chance to make appropriate demands on those who report to you.

In doing this you will have engaged the church in seeing your vision, you will have defined your own accountability to others above, and you will have outlined what you expect from those below.

One other thing. You must expect those who were closest to the personality pastor to steer you in the direction your predecessor had established. They probably will want to take charge—to sustain past momentum. Therefore you must quickly establish yourself as the spiritual leader of the church.

Here are the areas where you can expect difficulties to arise. Naming them is not a negative confession. It is simply the record of experience. Knowing what to expect will better equip you in handling the problem areas, and will give you positive motivation in your prayer life.

1. It's natural to feel guilty for taking a role that some of the people feel no man can take.

2. There will be a tendency, since you are following a legend, to be too polite. Walk gently here, but firmly, otherwise you may fall into the trap of allowing others to guide you rather than the Holy Spirit.

3. Be careful, as you establish your own image, that you don't refuse to listen to the men of God around you who honestly have the best interest of the church at heart. Many of these will have been close supporters of the former pastor but were not swept away by the power of his personality.

4. When you first arrive, you need to recognize you have no support team as yet, and must depend on those who served your predecessor for information and sometimes guidance.

5. Your biggest enemy will be yourself. Do not come into the situation with any preconceived ideas which will quench the Holy Spirit and keep you from God's best purpose for the church. Remember, it is just conceivable the former pastor had the mind of God for the church and your task is simply to fulfill his dream—much as Solomon fulfilled the dream of his father, David.

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In following a personality pastor you may find yourself in quicksand, or in a field white unto harvest. The choice is really up to you. If you walk with God, this can be the most exciting ministry imaginable. Or it could be the most miserable. The choice will be yours.

### **The Failure**

Perhaps the most difficult man to follow is the one who failed—or fell.

When the pastor of a large midwestern congregation resigned—after publicly confessing to sexual immorality—his church immediately split into five groups. The pastor had been an authoritarian type. The year before he had appointed an eldership, but it was composed of young men who almost worshipped him. When he fell, the elders scattered—taking the sheep with them. By the time the replacement pastor arrived on the scene, church attendance had dropped from 1,500 to less than 300. The new pastor stayed less than two years before conceding life was too short to have to spend it paying for another man's mistakes.

Two years ago a large, independent church in the Northwest made the headlines when the business administrator was accused of embezzling millions of dollars from the church building fund. Although he was found innocent in a series of court trials, the resulting publicity—plus the fact the money was indeed gone—devastated the church. The church school was closed and the buildings sold. The Bible college shut down. The church building was put up for sale to try to pay the debts. All seemed hopeless. However, the young pastor who took over worked closely with a large Pentecostal denomination who had indicated interest in helping. Even though the church was millions of dollars in debt and more than a thousand people had left—hundreds of them having literally to move out of town to escape persecution from the citizens—the new pastor continued to work with the people. He transferred title of the church to the denomination who then stepped in and helped them keep the building. Now, gradually, they are coming out from under.

Perhaps you remember what happened when Lee Iacocca, who had been president of Ford Motor Company, took over from John Riccardo at Chrysler Corporation when they were about to go under. Riccardo, with his financial background, was seen as a "bean counter." Despite some grand ideas, the organization was failing. A failing organization calls for a leader who is strong and clearly capable—a personality pastor, perhaps.

Iacocca was clearly that kind of man, and in a few short years turned the entire corporation around. He did it by hiring innovative men who came up with new ideas for cars—and a warranty plan which was better than any other automobile manufacturer in the world. He not only borrowed money from the federal government, but he kept a high pro-

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file before his employees and the American public as well. It's the old principle of the passengers needing to see the captain standing at the helm when the ship is caught in a storm.

Instead of hiring professional actors, Iaccoca made the national television ads himself. He plastered his picture in every magazine. Fortunately he had a face like Franklin D. Roosevelt—one which inspired confidence. He was honest with the public, saying Chrysler had been in trouble but he was going to change all that. And he did, paying off the debt years ahead of time. Now Chrysler is one of the most profitable automobile manufacturing companies in the nation.

A new pastor who follows an unsuccessful pastor may inherit a failing church in which people assume no responsibility for failure—blaming all the faults on the previous shepherd. If he moves in and tries to rescue such an organization, he may encounter resistance. If he has to cut costs, fire unneeded staff members, get rid of leaders who aren't leading, the people will quickly blame him as the one causing the church to fail. They may view him as an attacker, and fight against him rather than for him. They will not appreciate his efforts to save the church.

Such resistance can be a trap to the naive pastor. His automatic response will be to increase the pressures. This will cause the people to feel martyred, causing them to seek to undermine, limit and even destroy the pastor's position. This will become even worse if the pastor reacts with anger or frustration. At the same time, feeling alone, there will be a tendency for the pastor either to inflate himself or to gather around him a clique of "yes men" who will, in time, destroy him as surely as the wolves in the congregation.

This is what happened in a large southern church recently when a strong, authoritarian-type pastor stepped in—at the request of the denomination—to replace a pastor who had gotten his church into more debt than they could repay. The previous pastor had led his church into a huge building campaign out of a sense of insecurity—wanting to keep up with some of the super-churches in neighboring cities. Across the years he had fostered his own insecurity on his flock until many of them felt it was God's will to be in debt and build buildings they did not need and could not afford. When the new pastor suggested they should back off the building program, the congregation turned on him. In the end they blamed him for all their financial troubles.

Can this vicious downward spiral be avoided? Of course—by not letting it start. The new pastor should begin by being totally honest with his people. He should call them together and point out, in stark and realistic terms, what the church is up against. Every interested member must understand the state of the church. He should then invite people to consider what might be done to cope with the situation.

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Allowing much time for discussion of possible options, he should let each person come face-to-face with the size and shape of the problems, and the degree of commitment necessary to pull out of the fatal spin.

At this point he should then present his own plan, incorporating as many of the useful ideas he's received from his people as possible. In fact, it's a good idea to give them credit by name—so the people will feel needed and of value. Then the pastor should charge each person publicly, letting them know he believes they can fulfill their task. He should make it clear he will not only be watching, but is available to help if they have trouble getting their job done.

By all means he must make it clear that reality, not the pastor, demands commitment if the church is to survive. The pastor's job is to lead the attack on the problems, deflect any resentment which may come from the people toward himself or those committed to working with him, and challenge all the people to put their shoulder to the wheel for the glory of God.

Assuming another shepherd's sheep is never an easy task. But it is part of God's plan. Knowing this, no true pastor should grow weary of well-doing and give up. Second wind is not limited to marathon runners. Pastors can find it too—if they will run and not faint.

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