

MOVING ON

I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow. – 1 Corinthians 3:6

Perhaps you serve in a tradition like mine, where a bishop moves pastors from church to church, matching needs with gifts. In other traditions, local congregations hire their pastors (and fire them), and pastors have the freedom to move as they wish. Perhaps your plan is to start a church, raise up someone to pastor it, then leave and do it again somewhere else. Even if you hope to never leave your church, one day you will become unable to do the work. How do you know when it is time to move on? How do you prepare yourself and your church?

When to Leave

Sometimes the decision of when to move on is made for you by someone in authority, or by your health or other personal situation. In most cases, however, you will need to go through a process of discernment. Even when the decision belongs to someone else, you have to know whether God wants you to accept it or try to change their minds. I strongly encourage an annual retreat to seek God about his direction for your ministry. Make this one of the questions you pray about.

For some pastors, the very idea of leaving a family of believers is almost unthinkable. You have poured your life into these people. It may feel like giving up, being defeated, even betraying a sacred trust. This attitude can be very helpful when you are called to persevere through difficult times in ministry. But it can become a hindrance if God really is calling you to something new.

The apostle Paul rarely stayed at one church for more than a year. Barnabas, pastor of the church in Antioch (Acts 11:22-24), moved on to plant other churches (Acts 13:1-3). **Paul recognized that different pastors might be appropriate for different stages in a church's life.** He wrote, *I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow* (1 Corinthians 3:6).

I had been at my first church a little over three years when the bishop decided to move me to another congregation. I had grown to love the people, and as their pastor I felt God had given me a responsibility for them. But as I prayed about it, God showed me that I needed to widen my view.

If God, through the bishop, was calling me to become pastor of another church, that meant he was shifting my responsibility to the people of the new church. And God would not abandon the people of my old church. He would provide the right new leader to fulfill his plans for them.

This perspective helped me see beyond my own local church, and helped me be more objective later in my career when the time came to move again.

Sometimes the impetus to consider a move will come from a sense that your work in your current place is finished. You may feel that you have given the people all you have to give – or all they are willing to receive. If one day you find yourself really relating to Jesus' words about casting pearls before swine and shaking dust off your feet, maybe that's what is happening. Be very careful here. It could be time to move, but it could just be that you need a break, like the three month leave I mentioned in Chapter 8. **It would be a shame to give up on a good ministry just because your soul and body are exhausted.**

It may begin to seem that the people's vision for the future of their congregation has moved in a different direction from your own, to the point

where the two can't be brought back together. This doesn't necessarily mean somebody is wrong. It could be that God really is calling you and your congregation in different directions. If that's the case, God has someone in mind to lead the church where he wants it to go, and he has a place for you that will fulfill what God is calling you to do.

Sometimes the impetus to move has nothing to do with your current church. Things may be going great. But somehow you begin to feel drawn to something else – another church, another place, another form of ministry. Being drawn to a new ministry is an exciting and positive feeling, but it requires careful discernment. Is it a call from God, or a temptation from the evil one?

Depending on the way your church works, another congregation may ask you to leave your church and come work with them. An authority such as a bishop may tell you your skills are more needed in another congregation. Or you may feel that God is calling you to become an evangelist or a counselor or a teacher or a writer, rather than a local church pastor.

You don't want to run when God is calling you to stand. But what if God wants you to go? You don't want to stay and waste your gifts on a church that will not receive them. You don't want your continued presence to become an obstacle to God's next move in that place. And you don't want to deprive a potential new congregation of what God wants to do through you there.

Figuring all this out calls for great spiritual discernment. When things get tough, you have to know if God is calling you to stay and fight the spiritual battle, or make room for someone else, whose gifts and graces may be better suited to what the church needs right now. How do you know for sure?

Avoid talking about this with anyone in your own local church, at least initially. They are too close to the situation to see it objectively. They may have an agenda of their own. The best they can probably do is tell you what they think you want to hear. Instead, **find a small group of spiritually mature Christians from outside your church who can help you accurately discern God's direction** in this matter. It's best if at least some of them are pastors or Christian leaders who have been through similar situations in their

own lives.

Finally, if you stick it out long enough, there will most likely come a time when you will retire. **Retiring from actively leading a church does not mean retiring from God's work.** God always has something for his people to do. For me, it was writing. I never seemed to be able to set aside time to write while I was the full-time lead pastor of a church. I felt God leading me to take early retirement so I could make that time. Other pastors volunteer as hospital chaplains or teachers. Others feel called to just spend time with God, through gardening or art or reading or travel or just sitting in God's presence. Don't feel guilty if that's what you wind up doing. After all, being with God is what we were created for. The key is, don't retire just because you feel worn out, or to get away from something. **Retire to something.**

How to Leave

I was once appointed as pastor to a church where the previous pastor was retiring after thirty-four years with that one congregation. When he started about thirty people attended each week. When he retired the average attendance was over six hundred. Many of those people had never known another pastor. His children had grown up in that church and were still active there, now bringing his grandchildren. He owned a home in the neighborhood. He loved that church, and he would never do anything to hurt it.

But he couldn't let go. Publicly he turned over the reins to me, but privately he continued to meet with people. He continued to mentor church leaders. And naturally, they continued to see him as their pastor, instead of me. When I made decisions or tried to lead the church in ways that were different from what he would have done, people resisted. Eventually that pastor and one of the key leaders of the church left and started a new church down the road. Almost half the people, and most of the leaders, went with them. A few years later the bishop moved me to a different congregation. Years later that church, that my predecessor loved so much and in which he invested so much of his life, continues much smaller.

When you leave a church, leave. If God says stop being pastor of a congregation, stop. Trust God to take care of your old church; he won't move you until he has a plan for them. But that plan no longer includes you. If you stay around or keep coming back, you'll just get in the way of God's new plan. And you won't be available for what God wants to do with you.

There is one exception to this rule. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. That exception is when the long-term pastor of a church chooses and trains and grooms the new pastor. This process should be done carefully, prayerfully, with the full input of the other leaders of the church. It should take several years. During this time the retiring pastor should gradually turn over more and more authority and responsibility to the heir apparent, including preaching responsibility. Long before you officially step down, your successor should essentially be running the church.

When the day finally comes, have a big celebration. Perform some ritual or symbolic act, such as handing your successor your keys to the church office, to indicate the transfer of authority. Then stay out of the way. Don't talk to anyone unless your successor asks you to. Don't give advice unless your successor asks you for it. Even if you disagree with something, keep your mouth shut. Otherwise you can split the church.

Someone may ask, "What if I move on to another role? What if we all agree that I will turn over my day to day duties as pastor to someone else, but I will stay in the local congregation with a different ministry, perhaps using this church as a base for a traveling ministry of teaching or church planting or supervising other pastors?"

In theory that sounds good. However, I have never seen it work well. You are used to doing certain things and making certain decisions. If you remain in the same place, with the same people, simple human nature says it will be very difficult to stop doing those things and making those decisions, especially if people keep asking you to. And they will ask you to, because they are used to asking you. They know you know how to do it. They know you can probably do it faster and better than the new person.

You tell yourself you're just helping out. But what you are really doing is undermining the authority and confidence of the new pastor, and blocking

their opportunity to grow into the job. And you're taking time away from the new thing God has called you to do.

If you are moving into a new form of ministry, even if you will continue to be affiliated with the church you had led, it is best for all concerned if you make a clean break in a new location.

No matter what the circumstances of your departure, **leave a blessing behind.** I saw a cartoon showing a pastor in his pulpit, with bags packed near the door and a waiting taxi visible through the window. The pastor is saying, "I've wanted to preach this sermon for a long time." Don't use your last sermon to defend yourself or "tell off" people who gave you trouble. That won't help the church. It will only make you look bad.

Instead, use your last days and weeks to bless people. Personally thank people for being part of the church, and for specific things they did that were helpful. Encourage them to support the new pastor, for the good of the church.

Go to your office and try to think like a new pastor coming in. What would you need to know? Organize things. Make lists. Throw stuff out. **Your successor will be building on the foundation that you laid, so make it as easy as possible to build well.**

Resist the temptation to warn the new pastor against certain church members. You may have had a bad time with them, but your successor might have a very different experience.

It's very important to make a public statement to the effect that, while you have been blessed and honored to be the pastor of this church, from this point on you are the pastor no longer. Encourage people to look to the new pastor for their spiritual needs and church leadership. Tell them you will not interfere. Then honor that word.

After all, **if God no longer needs you to pastor this church, he must need you someplace else. So get to it!**

When the Pastor Has to Be Removed

This is a difficult section to write.

One church I served had two services every Sunday morning, with a time for refreshments in between. We also hosted another congregation in another part of our building. One Sunday, during the refreshment time between services, the wife of the pastor of the guest congregation called me into another room and told me her husband was in jail. He had been arrested the night before for a serious crime.

Pastors are human beings. We are subject to the same frailties and temptations as anyone else. **Sometimes pastors fall.** And if the fall is serious enough, the pastor may have to be removed.

No one is immune. 1 Corinthians 10:12 says, *If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall.* Every local church or association of churches needs to **prayerfully create a written policy detailing the steps to take if there is a credible accusation of serious wrongdoing** on the part of a pastor. Do this before the situation arises. When you are in the middle of dealing with a scandal, with emotions running high and possibly reporters and police asking questions, that is not the time to be figuring out what to do.

Here are the steps I recommend.

1. **Make sure the church is protected** from loss or damage that may be brought on by a pastor's misconduct. For instance, in the United States, an accuser may file criminal charges, and may also sue the pastor. Beyond that, the church as an institution can be sued, and so can church leaders, on the pretext that they should have set up safeguards. Most American churches carry large insurance policies to cover legal fees and damages in the case of such accusations.

2. **Decide what transgressions warrant disciplinary action** within the church. Consider such things as doctrinal differences and actions unbefitting a Christian, as well as accusations of criminal, sexual or financial wrongdoing.

3. **Decide what will constitute a substantive accusation.** In my denomination, for instance, an accusation of sexual misconduct must be submitted in writing and signed by the alleged victim before an investigation

will take place. This is to protect pastors from spurious allegations.

4. **Decide which transgressions call for the pastor to be removed** from authority for the protection of the church while the accusation is being investigated, and which, if any, can be investigated while the pastor continues to serve.

5. **Decide what will be done to provide for the pastoral needs of the congregation** if the pastor needs to be removed during an investigation.

6. **Decide what will be done to provide for the needs of the accused pastor and family** during the investigation.

7. **Decide who will conduct the investigation.** Ideally this should be a body of objective outsiders who are familiar with the workings of churches, such as a group of other pastors.

8. **Decide what will be done when the investigation has been concluded.** For pastors who are found innocent, how will their names be cleared? If found guilty, what kind of discipline will be instituted, what kind of rehabilitation will be offered, and how will it be decided if and when they may return to being a pastor?

Planning like this is good and important, but it is worthless unless the pastor and congregation agree to abide by it. It is not unknown for a pastor who has been removed from one church to go off and start another one nearby, with many of the same people following. There's usually not a lot you can do if this happens, so forgive, learn, and move forward.

I pray you will never have to deal with these things, but **establish policies just in case.**

Points to Remember

- Very few pastors stay in one church their whole careers.
- God may be calling you away from a bad situation or toward a new opportunity; just be sure it is really God calling and not your own fears or ambitions.
- When you leave, go as you hope the pastor you are following will leave the place you are going.

- Have a policy for situations that may result in a pastor being forced to leave.