



JOURNEYING ON...

How to Gracefully Leave a Ministry

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These days, the duration of a clergy member's career is rarely committed to one congregation or ministry. Even in rural areas, clergy are more transient and less likely to remain in one position, serving the same congregation for life. Some denominations intentionally rotate pastors every few years.

Leaving a ministry can be a positive or negative experience. When a fruitful and productive pastor leaves to pursue a better opportunity, the departure is positive, albeit bittersweet, for the friends left behind. People are happy for the departing minister, who anticipates God accomplishing new things through his or her life and ministry. However, unfavorable expulsion from a ministry creates an entirely different and more difficult scenario.

What do you do when you are leaving due to unresolved conflict, a leader's moral failure or a lack of confidence in the current leadership? How do you handle leaving if the failure is your own? How should you respond when you are asked to leave, even if a large constituency wants you to stay? Do you depart quietly, start another church, or fight it out?

Use the following guidelines to help you think through your options in this delicate situation:

Guidelines for Leaving a Ministry

Know when you are supposed to leave. (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

Many ministers tend to give in too quickly when confronted by disgruntled church members. Conversely, some ministers often overstay their season of service. Extricating yourself from a ministry that you founded or nurtured by the sweat of your brow requires difficult, emotionally painful decisions. Make sure you listen carefully to God's direction. If you do not, He will have to apply more pressure, even dismissal, to cause you to move on.

Plan how and when to leave with existing leadership, if at all possible.

Consider the congregation's best interest in your plan to leave. The timing and steps taken should be mutually planned with the remaining leadership. This is especially crucial if unresolved conflict or offense exists.

Do not fight for your position or contend with those in authority. (Hebrews 13:17)

If your church governing board asks you to leave (even for wrong reasons), then you must leave. David did not fight against Absalom when he contended for David's throne. Instead, David entrusted himself to God and allowed God to decide the outcome. Do not fight for your position or try to persuade people to take your side. Answer questions truthfully and commit yourself to Him who judges righteously (1 Peter 2:21-23). Remember, it was God who brought you to this place of ministry, it has been by His grace that you have served, and He will decide whether or not you will remain.

Leave graciously.

Be at peace with those who are contending, falsely accusing or dealing wrongly with you (Hebrews 12:14). Bless them, do not curse them, even if they are wrong (Romans 12:14). Do not return insult or gossip for injury. Do not share negative or inflammatory details. Remember, God hates those who sow discord among the brethren (Proverbs 6:19). Be like Jesus.

Deal appropriately with your emotional pain.

You will naturally feel pain when you fail and others reject you or accuse you of inadequacy, especially if the accusations are not true. Make sure you go to God—not members of the congregation—with your pain. A trusted mentor, mature friend or counselor can help you find God's healing for your wound. If you continue to harbor emotional wounds, or fail to forgive until the sting of the offenses is gone, you will carry that negativity into your next assignment in the Kingdom.

Take special care of your spouse and family.

Your spouse and family will often feel as much or more pain and frustration as you do. They are only indirectly involved in your situation, which hampers their ability to resolve hurtful and angry feelings. So you have to deal not only with the church but with your family as well. Be sensitive to their needs and find someone who can help all of you.

If you feel led to start another ministry, do it right.

Do not try to build your ministry at the expense of another one. Carefully examine your heart and make sure you are doing the Lord's will, not your own. Clearly communicate your intentions to the leadership of the ministry you are leaving. Ask for their blessing. If it is not readily forthcoming, proceed slowly, seeking counsel and involving a mediator if the other party is willing. If they are not, prayerfully continue without rancor.

Do not forget, you will reap what you sow (Galatians 6:7).

Most importantly, remember that your current actions are sowing seeds whose fruit will be reaped in your future. Many ministers in crisis fail to consider the effect of their conduct on others and the future ramifications of leaving inappropriately. The golden rule provides an excellent guideline: Leave as graciously as you would want others to leave your ministry.