

When and How to Change Ministries

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"Feuding Cripples Church"

That December 1996 headline was plastered on page 1 of the city newspaper. By a 17-6 margin, the deacons and trustees had voted the pastor out. But the pastor refused to budge. The board changed the locks to keep the pastor out. The pastor countered with a lawsuit. During one worship service, as the preacher's supporters escorted him to the pulpit, they were blocked by a wall of detractors who wouldn't let them by. When a shouting match erupted, 20 policemen were called to the scene. When he finally got to preach, foes heckled the pastor and passed around a "competing" collection plate. The deplorable feud erupted over an issue that every Christian vocational worker eventually faces: When is it time to leave? And when I've decided on a move, how should I go about it? When you wrestle with this issue, chances are the match won't be covered by your local newspaper. But just to make sure your situation never merits adverse media attention, mull over the following suggestions.

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I. Before You Leave

The next time you consider resigning, allow these probes to inform your thinking.

Why does another job appeal to me? *"All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the Lord weighs the motives"* (Prov. 16:2). If the new opportunity paid the same and didn't promise to escalate my reputation among peers, would it still pique interest?

Where can I contribute most to the kingdom of God? How has the Lord put me together to minister in His name? Does the new opportunity allow expanded utilization of my background experiences and ministry strengths? Does the group I currently serve need abilities I don't possess, or a leadership style that's foreign to me?

Who can help me sort through this decision? *"Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counselors they succeed"* (Prov. 15:22). To apply the principle of multiple counselors, look for people with objectivity from outside your congregation or organization. Consult those with ministry experience who have sparred with similar decisions. And select individuals who know you well, who are familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of your temperament, as well as with your distinctive leadership capabilities. Only advisors who meet these criteria can predict whether you'll thrive for the Lord in a different employment context.

Am I tempted to resign due to recent criticism, or an emotional low following an unusually demanding phase of ministry? There's nothing wrong with "feeling like resigning." just don't let negative emotions or temporary exhaustion result in an impulsive departure. If you avoid interpersonal conflicts or unpleasant confrontations now, copping out could become a pat- in your life. Then you'd never reap the benefits of a long stay in one place. If you are too physically or emotionally spent to continue, ask for a sabbatical before making an abrupt change of address.

How will a change affect my spouse and children? Involve them in the process of praying and weighing the pros and cons. When you candidate at a new location, ask permission to take your entire family.

Am I finding it more difficult to follow the lead of my senior pastor or supervisor? Am I chomping at the bit to change things over which I have little control? Is my loyalty to the group's leadership or its direction waning? When you can't support your superiors, it's time to leave. God doesn't direct associate staff members to stay on the scene and recruit supporters for their particular agendas.

Two decades ago, I resigned an associate staff position. In my conversations with friends in the church, I was finding it difficult to speak positively about the senior pastor. Despite our differences, I considered the pastor an ethical man who deserved my loyalty. The last thing God wanted me to do was hang around and spill the beans about our philosophical differences.

What effect will my departure have on the health of people and programs I leave behind? Who will pick up the slack in fulfilling my most essential responsibilities? Have I trained others to teach, to plan a retreat, to chair a committee, to recruit volunteers? If you haven't prepared others to succeed at least until your replacement comes, you're probably parked in front of a red light rather than a green one. Perhaps the greatest indicator of your leadership effectiveness is how the people you serve prosper in the months following your resignation.

Will leaving now result in broken promises or short-circuit the accomplishment of specific ministry goals? *"O Lord, who ... may dwell on Thy holy hill? He who ... swears to his own hurt, and does not change"* (Ps. 15:1, 4c). God's Spirit normally doesn't lead a CE Director to leave in the middle of a program evaluation or attendance drive that he or she instigated. Nor does He nudge a youth pastor to grab the lure of a larger church offer after promising his tenth graders he would stay through their high school graduation. Nor does the Lord tell a pastor to accept an unexpected call soon after he promised to chair next year's city-wide crusade. If those questions don't provide a resolution to your dilemma, you can always ask the Lord for a clear-cut sign. Tell Him you'll resign the day the church board changes the lock to your office, or ushers pass around a "competing" collection plate in the middle of your sermon!

Once you've decided to resign, consider how to proceed.

II. How To Leave

Who should be the first to know that I'm resigning? An associate should inform the senior pastor or immediate supervisor before spreading the word among other staff members or friends in the congregation. I know a pastor who felt betrayed when he was one of the last persons to learn of his CE Director's resignation. If you're the senior pastor, talk to your elders or deacons before church members find out.

How can I grease the rails for a smooth transition to my successor? Pose the following questions to other staff members, the church board, and key lay leaders whom you supervise: What do you need from me during these last weeks? What information or training will keep things running smoothly until my successor arrives? Prepare a notebook for your successor, chockfull of program information, office procedures, and policies integral to the job description. Ponder ways to save this person's time once he or she comes on board.

After resigning, how long should I remain in the church and community? The consensus among experienced churchmen is "not long!" Severing your ties quickly expedites acceptance of your successor and minimizes inevitable comparisons people will make. In a *Leadership* article to pastors, Donald Bubna said, "The sooner one leaves following the resignation, the sooner the healing begins and the church can start to look for a successor."

Bubna also cautions against frequent visits to the previous congregation, particularly during the first couple years. He says it's "professional courtesy" to return only with the prior awareness and blessing of your replacement. "Whether or not the split was on friendly terms, any return to the parish needs to be instigated by the new shepherd without pressure from either the prior pastor or his supporters." Limiting your visits allows for a bonding to occur between the people and the new staff member

Whether you're riding a wave of popularity when you resign, or you're voted out by a 3 to 1 margin, how you leave a position says a lot about your character!

Just as we would examine a human body for health at several levels it can be helpful for leaders to look at a local congregation in the same manner. When a person goes for a routine physical the doctor begins on the outside and works toward the inside. The person's weight, height, and an overview of the skin is followed by closer looks inside.

Are there parallels between the doctor's physical exam and the evaluation by the leaders reflecting on the health of the church 'body'? One immediately thinks of the emphasis on the members of the body, each with unique gifts, roles and interdependence described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12-14.

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