

How to Leave A Pastorate

Ministers are more surprised than anyone else to discover that when the time comes to leave a congregation they do not know how to say good-bye. Many pastors look upon those final weeks as a meaningless marking of time. Some pastors have even destroyed the good work that they have done in previous years by inappropriate behavior as they have left a community. Congregations often are of little help. They, too, find it hard to say farewell.

Since the pastor takes the initiative in leaving, he should also take the initiative in making the last weeks as effective as possible. He ought to take a fresh look at his role and ask himself how his leaving at this time will affect each member of his congregation. Some of them will feel rejected by his departure. Others will be threatened, for they have depended upon him as a primary source of love and worth. He has been involved in important aspects of his parishioners' lives. That will be interrupted. Some people will feel guilty and vaguely responsible for his leaving.

The minister should realize that in some instances the congregation as a whole may feel rejected and will reject him in return. Even if the congregation feels that the pastor is going on to bigger and better fields, what kind of reward is that for its loyalty? It implies that the congregation is less important than the next one that the pastor will serve. To lose a pastor is to receive a negative judgment. It is difficult for the congregation not to be critical of its departing pastor.

The pastor can reassure the congregation of its importance and uniqueness. He should avoid comparisons and should help his parishioners do the same. This will enable the pastor to talk about the mission of that congregation, and about what the will of God means in his own life.

During the final weeks of his ministry the pastor should also attempt to heal strained relationships with members who may have negative feelings toward him. That category usually includes people who are antagonistic toward all authority—not necessarily

toward the pastor as a person. It may be that only as the minister is no longer the authority can the antagonistic church member feel free to establish any kind of relationship.

Every congregation also includes independent people who need pastoral support but cannot accept it. These people often shoulder heavy responsibility and occupy lonely positions in their church, home, work, and civic life. Perhaps they have repeatedly rejected the pastor's overtures of friendship. In the last weeks of a pastorate these relationships may bloom. When a minister accepts a new position, he then has something in common with those independent people.

Proper good-byes to children in a congregation are often overlooked. Many of the children are not going to understand why the pastor's children, who are their friends, have to move away. And they are not going to understand why this man who has been their pastor and their vacation Bible school leader is now going to leave them. The pastor and his family should visit Sunday school, and sit down and talk with the children about why they are leaving. The pastor can explain the meaning of God's will and can move into a friend-pastor role, making the situation easier for the next pastor.

Ending the pastor's counseling ministry properly is also essential. The minister usually knows at least a month in advance that he's moving. He has a commitment to his counselees and needs to do everything in his power to stimulate growth in the final sessions. Some counselees may feel free to discuss things that they have never felt at liberty to share before. The minister also should refer his counselees to other counselors.

Relocation is sometimes difficult for the children. The minister and his wife should pray that their children will grow as a result of the move. Parents should also pray that the experience will expand their children's understanding of being in full-time Christian service. During a time guaranteed to be free of interruption—such as

after an evening meal—each family member could deal with the change in his own way. Elation, excitement, shock, and grief are all natural responses to the news. Why a child feels a certain way may be more important than what he or she feels. The parents should tell the children their thoughts on moving, too.

Casual family rituals, free from public fanfare, can also prepare the pastor and his family for moving. These include saying good-bye not only to people but also to important places. Examples are: a school that the children have attended, the hospital where a child was born, and the church where the family has worked and worshiped. As they visit these places they should think about the good times that have occurred there.

Special attention should be given to the house and grounds where the family has lived. In the weeks before moving day the importance of the children's bedrooms, the wife's kitchen, and the minister's study needs to be acknowledged and celebrated. A last manicure of the lawn and enjoyment of the shade of a favorite tree can help bring a sense of gratitude and well-being.

Obviously, no minister can hope to accomplish all of this before leaving a pastorate. He can only do so much. The important thing is for him to leave knowing that he has shown courage in a crucial moment in his own life, in the life of his family, and in the life of the church. He needs to be able to say, "I have taken the initiative in leaving relationships on an upswing. We all know that I am no longer the pastor, but we do know that we *are* friends." Every pastor needs to realize that he can plan how to end a piece of his work. He can conclude it on an optimistic, positive, redemptive note, or he can end it on a pessimistic, destructive, and antagonistic one. He has the choice, and he will live with that choice for the rest of his life.

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