

When It's Time to Leave

Gordon MacDonald

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A pastor is wise to wrestle with the *leave-decision* on an annual basis—a few days budgeted for self-examination, for seeking the insight of reliable counselors.

In February 1999, I made a leave-decision. I informed the congregation I served, Grace Chapel in Lexington, Massachusetts, that in five months I would resign and pursue other avenues of ministry: speaking, writing, teaching, consulting, mentoring.

I felt that my sixtieth year might be the right one to step aside in favor of a younger leader. And at sixty (at least I keep telling myself this), I felt I still possessed an innovative and risky spirit so I could embrace new projects, new ideas, new connections.

When the day came, the church named me Pastor Emeritus and offered kind words and generous gifts of appreciation. It was a good ending. Then they set out to find my successor, and they found a very good one. Today their momentum goes on well without me. In fact, a lot better. That's what this piece is about: leaving a (not "the") ministry, leaving it *happily* (satisfied about your work), leaving it *honorably* (in a way that's appreciated), and leaving it *appropriately* (no burning of bridges).

Recognizing the right moment to leave is among the leader's most difficult decisions. Leave too early, and you're likely to feel yourself a quitter and your work incomplete. Hang on too long, and your good work unravels and becomes counter-productive.

The prophet Jonah once made a leave-decision. On a Tarshish-bound boat, knowing he shouldn't be there but hoping God wouldn't notice, the situation deteriorated.

"Throw me overboard," Jonah cried at last.

Instead, "the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before." Bad decision. When the crew has to row

harder than it should, a leave-decision may be called for. For once Jonah got it right, and when he went over the side, things on deck got better.

This raises a bothersome question: when is it time for a leader to go over the side?

Friends in the military tell me that retreat is the most dangerous of all maneuvers. I'm not surprised. It's just as hard to bring a ministry to a satisfying conclusion (for both the pastor and congregation). Discerning the judicious moment is no simple matter.

No book I know dictates the ideal term of pastoral ministry. Some traditions (Methodists in the recent past or Salvation Army corps officers) traditionally thought a two-year term was ideal because the pastor stuck to pastoring and little else. He didn't stay long enough to get too deeply into the fabric of the church or become the darling of the people. But who could ever describe the havoc this quick-transfer system must have caused for clergy families who knew nothing of a stable home, long-term relationships, or a work with a satisfying sense of completion?

On the other hand, my hero, eighteenth-century Charles Simeon (Holy Trinity, Cambridge, England) stayed in one place for 54 years. Many pastorates in New England, where I live, extend for 20 years or more.

I served at Grace Chapel for 13 years and then, several years later, returned for 7 more. Some referred to the two periods as the "reign" of Gordon I and Gordon II. Having served three other churches, I thus made the "leave" decision five times in 38 years. Each time I felt two things: a sense of completion of my pastoral purpose, and a sense of inadequacy about the church's future.

I also felt the congregations I served sensed completeness. I could honestly see where people might tire of me and my leadership style. I tended to resist the status quo, and I enjoyed poking and prodding people with edgy questions. I had my critics when I tried to get outside the organization in order to recalibrate my brain and heart.

Always I was aware that I brought to each church a bundle of insights and priorities that were suited to the moment. But I could not escape the reality that my "bundle" had a shelf-life, beyond which it was no longer germane to the needs of the congregation. And that was the moment to go over the side-before someone else brought up the idea.

When should a pastor take the plunge? What signals the best moment for a leave-decision? Here are eight hints.

#1: Incompatibility

Good church, good pastor, but a bad fit. The congregation needs a form of pastoral leadership that the sitting pastor does not possess.

Take, for example, the pastor who is entrepreneurial by instinct (read "visionary" or "passionate for growth"). He or she has a hungry eye on people *outside* the church and craves that the people *inside* would train their energies on creating an environment that focuses on the seeker.

The congregation, on the other hand, seeks a pause in the outward look. They want to build their sense of community and concentrate on spiritual development for a while (not always an inappropriate decision). The pastor grows impatient with what he perceives as congregational narcissism. The people feel exploited or used to satisfy the pastor's entrepreneurial ambitions. Each develops a suspicion of the other's agenda, and no amount of mutual reflection brings about convergence.

#2: Immobility

The congregation has become trapped in an ecclesiastical whirlpool-lots of programmatic motion but little sense of direction. By subtle control, some dominant church members quietly (or not so quietly) stymie every pastoral initiative. Fresh leadership is shrewdly neutralized. There is an inescapable sense that the congregation is a closed community that plays church as a way of meeting the social needs of its constituents.

In New England I see these congregations frequently. They tend to be about 90 people in size (tops is 150). They recruit a pastor with promises of their desire for creative leadership and outreach opportunity. Then the pastor discovers the mafia-like informal leadership about a year later, and ministry is slowly reduced to heart-wearying political games. I am reminded of that mysterious phrase in 3 John about Diotrephes "who likes to put himself first." Diotrephes lives!

#3: Organizational transition

Healthy organizations inevitably reach growth points where a new kind of leadership becomes necessary. Not every pastor can adapt.

For example, good church planters are often "ungifted" in helping a church move beyond the 150-200 mark where a different administrative skill is required. A pastor who works best on his own becomes increasingly ineffective when church needs staff development and management.

Some pastors can build a solid organization of ministries (and buildings themselves). Once that building or reengineering period is over, this pastor may not be suited to lead the redirected ministry that, of necessity, follows. A wise (and humble) pastor learns for which era of church life he is best suited.

#4: Stagnancy

Sometimes pastors conclude that they can no longer personally develop in giftedness or leadership effectiveness in their present situation. A pastor's mind, compassionate heart, and unique spiritual gifts are his "stock in trade." *They must be in a constant state of enhancement.* When a congregation prevents its pastor's personal growth, the result will be boredom and mediocrity for everyone.

Among the things I appreciated about the Grace Chapel congregation was its love for a provocative sermon. There were times—knowing their expectations—when I felt I'd really let them down. So I worked harder as I prepared the next sermon. I knew people would be back with their Bibles and notebooks, eager to glean at least one good idea that would stay with them throughout the week.

It was a healthy pressure on me to produce fresh insights and useful applications for their lives in the larger world beyond the church doors. If that expectation had been missing or if I had been unable to keep growing, I would have felt compelled to go over the side.

#5: Fatigue

While similar to Stagnancy, there are important differences. In this case the ministry lacks a "renewing" component, and the pastor concludes that he or she is on continual spiritual-psychological-physical discharge.

I know this condition a bit more intimately than some of the others. Looking back, I feel I often created problems for myself by promising people more of myself than I was capable of delivering. I conveyed a message that I was open and available to everyone. But the truth was that, although I wanted it to be that way, I couldn't make it happen. Our congregation was too large; the programs were too many; the staff wanted more of me than I knew how to give. *I grew weary of trying to please everyone—and often feeling as if I pleased no one.* My problem, no one else's.

The result, however, was exhaustion and disappointment.

Sometimes a church's leadership does not discern this dynamic, and it fails to protect its pastor or ensure that times of renewal are regular and effective. When the fatigue reaches the chronic stage, going over the side may be necessary.

#6: Family morale

Occasionally comes a time when it's impossible to ignore the fact that one's spouse or children are being more harmed than helped by the present situation.

The reasons can be varied. No pastor can afford to sacrifice the family to unrealistic expectations of the congregation. Perpetual financial suffocation is not a healthy thing. Living conditions that embitter children, or church contentiousness that constantly humiliates or demeans a pastor in front of his own family are strong indications that a leave-decision is called for. Nothing has been gained if a pastor is successful in the church and a failure in the home.

#7: Closings and openings

This one—hopefully, the best of them all—is tricky and demands thoughtful, spiritual listening, and the counsel of trusted advisors.

One intuits that ministry in a particular church has reached a point of conclusion. Word comes that another congregation is seeking a pastoral leader. The new situation fits one's sense of call and giftedness. There is a curious ambivalence: the grief of saying goodbye to people who are loved and yet the excitement of a new challenge. Creative juices begin to flow. The mind is caught up with the anticipation of a new beginning. The emotions leap. There is the concurrence of a spouse, a bishop, or trusted advisors. Most of all, one feels that God is in the decision.

#8: The age factor

There comes a time when a pastor can no longer keep up with the pace of ministry's demands. Usually this reflects one's age. An aging pastor faces the terrible temptation to hold on to the job too long. The love he has for the people and the love they have for him is life-giving. To surrender the task to someone else is almost unthinkable because the person and the job have become indistinguishable.

But not to surrender the job is almost sure to invite a sad period in which the pastor unintentionally damages much of the good that previously had been done.

When you search the Scriptures for leave-decisions, you see a number of them. You see fathers blessing sons-handing on the legacy. You see Moses, Samuel, David, and Elijah laying the tracks for successors. You hear Jesus telling his disciples that it is "expedient" that he go away. You read the words of Paul

spurring Timothy and the church leaders at Ephesus to take the ball and run with it.

A pastor is probably wise to wrestle with the leave-decision on an annual basis—a few days budgeted for self-examination, for seeking the insight of reliable counselors, for candid evaluation based on previously set goals and intentions. If this discipline is pursued, it is likely that when the time to leave does come, it will be done in a moment of confidence that God has spoken, that a good work has been completed, and that there are new opportunities just ahead.

The greatest going-over-the-side I ever heard of (and this is not by way of recommendation) happened at Wheaton College about 40 years ago.

Wheaton's president, V. Raymond Edman, a godly man, was speaking in chapel one Friday morning. He had just finished telling about the time he had carefully rehearsed for an audience with the then-emperor of Ethiopia.

His application for the students, whom he felt had slipped into a spirit of irreverence in their worship, was simple: you must always be prepared to respectfully conduct yourself in the presence of the King of Kings.

Having made his point, Dr. Edman suddenly slumped to the floor and died. Having spoken of entering the presence of the King, he did it himself. He left, apparently, at the moment of God's choosing, whom, we trust, watches over our leave-decisions, too.

Gordon MacDonald is editor at large of Leadership.

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An Exit Strategy

Preparing for the final 20 years of your life.

There is great irony in pastoral life. You commit yourself to a life shaped by the call of God, which comes by way of bishops (or denominational executives) and congregations who bid you come to a particular place and to stay for an indeterminate period of time.

Then, when the ministry reaches its conclusion, you are expected to leave. Leave! Leave the area, friends, the sense of human security we all seek. This works (it worked for me) if preparations are made. In other circumstances, it can be disastrous.

A pastor is wise if he, like a pilot, is always aware of secondary landing fields if something goes wrong. The older you get, the more important it becomes to develop a plan for your life, attitude, and service when your organizational role ends. You cannot afford to enter the last third of life without it. Those who fail here end in anger and bitterness, feeling betrayed by their calling.

Is there a place for older pastors to serve? We will soon find out as growing numbers leave full-time ministry while they still have twenty vigorous years left in them. What shall they do with these years? Play golf? I hope not.

Better they find a way to keep serving the church, in ways that are an asset, not a liability, to God's people.

Here are 9 questions for forming a healthy strategy:

1. Have my spouse and I developed friends unrelated to my formal pastoral role? (Gail and I affectionately refer to these folks as those with whom we're going to die.)
2. Have we thought through the dynamics of our marriage when it's no longer affected by pastoral life?
3. Have I considered the conduct of my spiritual life when the demands of formal ministry no longer drive it?
4. Have I a financial plan that will enable me to continue some form of ministry even when there is no longer a paycheck from the church? Have I identified long-term themes and learning experiences that will keep my mind and heart supple?
5. Have I recognized forms of service where I can encourage and support younger leaders and their visions?
6. Have I thought through the emotional implications of a life no longer at the center of the church, when I have resumed the life of a common Christ-follower?
7. Have I begun to discipline myself to not slip into an attitude of reaction and criticism against those who take my place and do things differently? Will I be an "old guy" that people love to have around?
8. Have I studied the lives of those who transitioned gently and nobly into their latter years and sought a life of wisdom, encouragement, and prayer?

—Gordon MacDonald