

Letting Go Without Giving In (Leaving a Church and Letting Go)

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When a pastor or staff person leaves a congregation to serve in another place or to retire many challenges emerge for the departing staff or pastor and for the congregation. Learning to leave and let go is critical if the church and the minister is to move on. All too often, particularly when a new pastor or staff has not been called and even after someone has been called, the beloved, respected and tenured pastor/staff is called when someone is sick, hospitalized, in crises or bereaved. While the intent of the persons calling might be 'to inform' or 'to encourage them to visit, call or even to do a funeral' this often creates multiple 'sticky situations' and is often an imposition. *When a pastor or staff leaves a church the church needs to let them go. The pastor or staff needs to leave and not return. They need to leave and cleave to their new place of ministry or their retirement.*

Learning to Let Go

I'm keenly aware that not everyone will agree with this position however I've had more experiences than I like to recall where when a pastor or staff left a church field, but didn't leave the church family and pastoral concerns that troubled waters emerged. For instance:

- The new pastor or staff can't build connections with the new church family when the former pastor returns and stays connected
- The congregation often refuses to connect with the new staff or pastor as long as the former staff or pastor stays connected and ministers
- In some instances the church often decides not to pursue calling a new pastor or staff because the former staff or pastor continues to fill the ministry needs and counsel of members
- If when the position hasn't been replaced when the pastor or staff stays connected and seeks to respond to ministry calls or request from the former church the new church becomes jealous or resentful of time and focus being shared with former members and such doesn't create good 'first impressions'

The challenge for the former staff or pastor is to draw boundaries with the congregation at your departure that you would rather not be called back for weddings, funerals or crises. Not that you don't love them anymore but that you want to create space and opportunity for them to move on and for you to build new connections in your new place of ministry or to move into your retirement years and spend time with family. Yes, we must not only leave but not give in to the former church's desire (or maybe the minister's personal need) to stay connected. Such often creates an unhealthy dependency and barriers that prevent everyone from taking next steps.

Self-Assessment Inventory for the Minister:

- Do I want to stay connected to please my friends/former parishioners?
- What are the reasons for not wanting to connect with new parishioners?
- How can I move forward in my emotional, spiritual and relational health as I leave one ministry field and begin ministry in another place?
- What boundaries need to be set to help insure more balance in my life and ministry?

How the Church Can Help

Churches are learning some tough lessons these days about calling new staff and pastors. Churches are having to learn some tough lessons for helping a pastor or staff move on and allowing the church to move forward after a pastor or staff leaves for new ministry opportunities or to retirement. Hanging on emotionally, physically or spiritually is not helpful or healthy in most situations. It may feel warm and affirming, but in reality more often than not such creates stressful situations for the churches involved and the people involved. The church can help the situation by considering these:

Tips for an effective transition from one pastor or staff to another:

1. Honor them while they are your pastor or staff member. Celebrate and affirm on anniversaries and landmark events.
2. When God moves them to another ministry place celebrate their ministry and their obedience to following God's leadership. Let them go as a true act of faith and confidence that God has another leader already selected for you.
3. Never call a new pastor or staff member to bring their vision to help your church. BEFORE you call a new pastor or staff person work with the congregation to discern God's calling and vision for your church and then go find a leader to gifted to lead you to and thru that vision that comes from the pew. Such will ensure a more effective future for the church and search process
4. Acknowledge in private and public that you love and value their ministry and that you will respect their need to connect with the new place and people they will be ministering with and will therefore not call on the former leader for counsel, visitation or officiating at weddings or funerals. Certainly they could be invited to significant events – but as a participant only – so they feel the permission to decline if they feel necessary. If they are invited to lead they often do not feel permission to decline.
5. Send them off to a new place of ministry or to retirement years of ministry by planning a commissioning service for them and the congregation. Send them off with your blessing, prayers, celebrations, affirmations and boundaries to let them leave their responsibilities at one place and cleave to responsibilities of ministry to a different people in a different setting. (See A Contemporary Handbook for Weddings & Funerals and Other Occasions by Aubrey Malphurs and Keith Willhite, editors)

Assessment Inventory for Congregations:

- What are the reasons we have for wanting to hang on to the former minister?
- What are the motivations we have? Are they honorable or self-serving?
- How does not letting go restrict your ability to live into the future effectively?
- How can letting go empower your congregation, your new leadership and your former ministers?
- What fears need to be acknowledged and walked into to empower your congregational leaders and members to move forward in faith and embrace of new leadership?

Leaving and letting go is not easy for church members or for staff and pastors. However to help everyone move forward in faith and ministry it seems the better way. What do you think? How can your next leadership transition become a step toward greater wholeness, health and balance for life and ministry?

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Submitted to NetResults 10/21/03

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