

Pastor, I'm Leaving

John R. Cionca

This article first appeared in *Leadership, A Practical Journal for Church Leaders*, Spring 1987

When Jack, a fellow pastor and friend, arrived for dinner, I could see he was troubled. Later he shared the source of his dejection: "Today one of my key leaders told me he's leaving the church." The member wasn't moving out of town. Just leaving.

While Jack spoke, I felt my own anger and hurt resurfacing from similar experiences in the pastorate. I wanted to help him, but other than sharing his discouragement over the loss of disgruntled members, how could I?

I decided to ask a dozen colleagues how they handle the emotional fallout from dropout members.

A Common Denominator

All of them share a sense of failure when a family leaves the church. A pastor in the Southwest admits: "Sometimes I have been able to say, 'Well, you can't win them all.' But when I'm alone with my thoughts, my mind wanders back to those people. I try to guess what's behind their leaving. I know I can't minister to everybody, but it hurts when people leave."

Another observed: "No matter how much explanation people give to assure me that 'It's not you, Pastor,' I still feel that pain personally. Pastors typically accept overall responsibility for the church's ministry. Whether the unhappiness is with an adult class, the youth ministry or the music, the pastor always feels the sting.

"You can usually narrow down the reasons for leaving to a few," one pastor told me. "People feel they don't belong, they don't agree with some doctrine, they want a different style of program, or they don't have any friends. Often they say they're 'not being fed.'"

But since the church often reflects the pastor's personality and philosophy of ministry, when a member announces, "I'm leaving the church," pastors translate that, "I'm rejecting you!"

Contributors to the Pain

A number of factors affect how deeply a pastor will feel the loss:

The Personality Factor. On psychological inventories such as the Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis or the MMPI, pastors' scores vary regarding sensitivity versus indifference, subjectivity versus objectivity, or relational orientation versus task orientation. But our profession necessitates building relationships, and therefore ministers are in a position to be hurt by people who seemingly reject their ministry. The more sensitive, subjective, or relational one's personality, the more intense will be the hurt.

The Surprise Factor. Often we're not surprised by someone leaving. Some members let their disagreement be known, and we are psychologically prepared for their departure. But when a couple just disappears and we hear rumors they're attending elsewhere, we take that news much harder.

The surprise factor definitely had an impact on my friend Jack. Fred, who left his church, taught an adult Sunday school class. He was preparing to coordinate the home bible study program. The previous Sunday Fred had assisted Jack on the platform. The next morning he told Jack that he and his family were leaving the church. The greater the surprise, the greater the wind that is knocked out of us.

The Investment Factor. Pastor Ron poured a lot of time and energy into the Johnsons, and Joan Johnson grew in her church responsibilities. Then she began to struggle in her marriage. For eighteen months the church cared for the Johnsons, supporting their marriage, watching their children, praying for them. In the end, however, Joan decided she wanted out of her family—and out of the church. The more we have invested in a member, the more it hurts when one leaves.

The Statistical Factor. Departing members damage statistics, and whether we like it or not, we are influenced by the statistical game, at least emotionally. The feeling out there is that a successful pastor is one whose church is growing. A pastor who has “built” a church is more attractive than the pastor of a dwindling congregation.

No one knows this better than the pastor of a smaller congregation. For example, when Westinghouse transferred one of a family of six to New York, our Sunday School attendance declined 3 percent.

The second part of the statistical game is income. A church that is meeting or exceeding its budget appears more successful than a church struggling with finances. When a tithing family leaves, their loss is felt financially. In a small church, that tithe may be a substantial percentage of the budget, and the decrease in statistics may cause some to question the pastor’s leadership.

The Prestige Factor. During my last pastorate, one particular loss hurt me deeply because of the couple’s prestige. Ben and Alice were long-time church members. For over a decade Ben had served as a deacon and worship leader. He was chairman of the search committee that called me.

Sixteen months into my ministry, Ben shared that he and Alice would be leaving the church. Gracious people, they didn’t make any waves. I highly respected them and understood their reasons. But Ben was a pillar of the church, a nationally known evangelical leader, and a board member of my seminary.

While we tell ourselves we can’t scratch where everyone itches, we sure would like to scratch effectively for people like Ben and Alice. Losing them impacts us significantly.

The Spin-off Factor. I am convinced the most important ingredient for church growth is congregational attitude and esteem. When someone leaves the church to attend a different one, it is a blow to a church’s self-esteem. When more than one family leaves, people begin to wonder: What’s going on around here? What’s wrong with us?

Because they know someone’s leaving hurts the church’s self-esteem, pastors feel the loss doubly.

Coping with the Inevitable

In any ministry, some sheep will look for other pastures (and pastors). So how can pastors cope with the feelings of hurt, loss, and failure that accompany these migrations? As I mulled over the responses from my colleagues, I arrived at several conclusions:

Concede that people will leave your ministry. You've heard the expression, "What you don't know can't hurt you." Not so! Mid-life men need to anticipate career restlessness and older couples should count on the empty-nest syndrome. So must pastors anticipate the reality of losing members through discontent.

One pastor put it: "I try to take heart by remembering that it has happened before and it will happen again. People will leave, but it's not the end of the world. Every pastor in the country has faced it."

Praise God for diversity. People are different. That's why McDonald's, Taco Bell, Kentucky Fried Chicken all stay in business. People don't leave their preferences at home when they attend church. They appreciate different styles of worship, program, and involvement. One pastor considered such preferences not necessarily bad: "Just as some pastors would not appeal to me if I were sitting in the pew, I recognize I will not appeal to everyone either."

Another minister noted, "There are differences in gifts and styles of ministry, and at the present, some individual may need something else."

The Lord is building his universal church, and a subtraction from my particular congregation might actually be a blessing. One pastor wisely observed: "there are some people the Lord might move on. Maybe down the road you'll see that by his grace he protected you from deeper problems. Sometimes it's best for you and the overall welfare of the church when people leave."

Look beyond the complaint to the concern. In one church, I was asked to resolve a dispute over having a woman teach an adult Sunday school class. This woman had previously taught in the adult elective program, but for two years had to be sidelined until the elders could "study the issue." After two marathon sessions, the board concluded she could teach.

Although the board strongly endorsed the decision, one elder who held a very conservative view resigned. To my surprise, the woman and her husband also left the church shortly thereafter.

The dispute over teaching was only a surface issue. What the woman really wanted was for me to say, "Yes, I understand that you have been hurt and not treated fairly." She primarily sought love and affirmation of her worth. Only secondarily did she desire resolution of the teaching issue.

I had rolled up my sleeves and attacked the surface problem but had failed to communicate my concern for her personally. I wish I had heard then the advice given by one pastor: "I try to get beyond my feelings to focus on the hurts of the person leaving."

Accept criticism where applicable. Even after people quit, we can't simply write them off. One pastor said, "After people leave, I feel guilty: Have I tried everything? Was I fair? Was I open enough?" People's absence leaves us with nagging questions.

Another minister stated: "Maybe I've done something wrong. Maybe something is lacking either in my personal ministry or the ministry of the church. So I try to honestly evaluate what is said to see if there is truth in it." While we might not retain disgruntled members, their loss may point out personal shortcomings that, when corrected, will help us with other people in the future.

Process your feelings with another person. One of the questions I asked my friends was, "How do you get back on track after a family has left?" There was great overlap on one response: "Talk it out with a friend."

"I try to share my burden with another pastor who understands," one advised. "People who aren't

in the ministry often don't comprehend what it feels like when someone leaves, so I meet with pastors who have experienced and understand the same circumstances."

A pastor of a larger church noted that he confided in the staff members. "We compare notes. Maybe I don't know the whole story. Though the rejection is still there, it gets easier if you can discuss it."

Another pastor confided in a key layman: "I felt comfortable sharing with him. He may not have the answer, but just being able to talk with him helps."

Whether we share with a spouse, board member, staff member, or pastor friend, a loving listener seems to aid in healing the hurt experienced when someone leaves.

Leaving the Door Open

Knowing people are unhappy with my ministry is disquieting; going to them when they are leaving is utterly disconcerting. Nevertheless, some pastors contact people who leave the church.

Ken Trivilla at Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, conducts an exit interview, believing the information gained will benefit the church. The Wooddale staff feels everyone who leaves the church should be given a "proper burial." Ken says, "I want to leave people with the feeling they can return if they want to. I always try to meet people personally, face to face."

What's sometimes hard is interviewing people you're glad are leaving. "One man left because he felt he was able to teach better than some of our teachers," Ken recalls. "I took him to lunch and listened to his grievances. When it became apparent I was not trying to woo him back to the church but was just allowing him to share his position, he got angry."

In another situation, the church had put a couple to work too quickly. Ken says, "They had come from a church in Chicago, and in the fall we put them in a teaching slot. By December they decided to leave our church. I called them right away, and tried to rebuild our bridges. They didn't return, but we parted good friends."

Whatever follow-up technique used, I want the particulars of a given situation to determine my response. A couple of times I have met with the people to talk about their leaving. I have also phoned members who had begun attending another church. In two other situations I wrote people a cordial letter indicating I recognized their departure and wished the best for them.

In each of the circumstances I felt it was important to do three things:

First, I wanted to apologize if either my demeanor or our church ministry offended them. If there was any barrier on my part, I wanted it removed. Who was at fault was not the issue.

Second, I wanted to reaffirm our philosophy of church ministry. I did not want them to think our church's direction would necessarily change simply because they were unhappy about it.

Third, I wanted to leave the door wide open for their return. If they subsequently learned the pews were not softer on the other side of the block, I hoped they would feel free to return. I remained on cordial terms with all six of the families that left our church, and one eventually came back into our fellowship.

Researching this article has encouraged me. Not that the reality of my friends' pain was encouraging, but I was uplifted by the fact we were a fellowship of ministers experiencing the same concerns and affirming one another.

Tomorrow morning I'll return to the church I am serving as interim pastor. Since the previous pastor left, some church members have drifted away, and hurt feelings surround the entire congregation. The pain is deep, and I feel it.

But we can learn from our injuries and grow through our pain. And we may become God's messengers to other colleagues when they, too, hear the words: "Pastor, I'm leaving."