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No, Don't Leave Us....

Ways to deal with a pastor or ministry leader deciding to unexpectedly leave and how to fill the leadership void left in the aftermath.

You go to church on Sunday expecting it to be just another typical service. You leave stunned, bewildered and somewhat afraid. Your mind races with a variety of scenarios. From betrayal and abandonment to shock to anger, your hearts leaps from one raw emotion to another. You wonder where you will ever find a replacement.

That is somewhat how many people feel after they learn that the lead pastor at their church will be leaving. It doesn't matter the reason why this person is leaving. It can be a hard thing to come to grips with.

Why? What does this reveal about how the people in the seats each week view the person in the pulpit? These are deep and painful questions to ask. And if you face the scenario of losing a beloved leader, you will have to address them. One way or the other, you will either be stronger as a community because of the experience. Or else your local fellowship will begin to disintegrate, become weaker and eventually collapse on itself.

Whether or not a fellowship survives the loss of a leader or any other major event depends on how the people react to the situation. If the people tend to panic, bicker, pout and leave, the fellowship will struggle to survive. If the people rally together, pray, pitch in and take responsibility for how they react, the fellowship will likely grow and thrive despite the transition in leadership.

Ultimately, the local church is about Jesus not the pastor. And if it is too focused on the leadership at the helm, then the fellowship is unhealthy anyway and borders on idolatry.

When you find out that a lot of people leave when a pastor does, you will begin to understand who may have been coming to hear one man talk instead of belong to a living community of dedicated disciples. This may not always be the case. Some of the members may share the leaders call to the next destination. But if a majority responds this way, then something was seriously wrong with the health of the fellowship.

If a fellowship struggles to celebrate sending off a pastor or leader, the people likely have placed too much importance on that person. The departure may actually force others to grow and establish more roots of their own. Long term, your fellowship may be better off because others will have to step up and learn to lead.

Here are some things to remember when facing the transitioning of leadership. These comments are directed mainly at church leaders, especially the men of the fellowship. Remember, the men are responsible for setting the tone and preserving order. If things get out of hand it is because the men have allowed it to happen.

1.) Talk to God first before discussing the situation with others

As soon as the service is over, you will likely see people gather together and start to dissect what the announcement means for the church. This is the fertile soil for the enemy to sow fear, create division and arouse suspicion. People should first take the issue to God before calling all of their friends to vent their frustrations. Remember most gossip springs from well intentioned people. But all they are doing is releasing pent up feelings in a potentially corrosive way. They should ask God to calm their heart and let them know what they can do to further the Kingdom through the transition. They should take any sense of loss and grief to God. He can help them know how to turn tears into joy and fear into faith.

The leaders of the church must come together and pray, especially those tasked with picking new leaders and guiding the fellowship through the transition period. Prayer is not optional for survival. This may require long periods of prayer in private before the leaders are really ready to come together as group. Only you will know when you have sufficiently laid the issue before the Lord and let Him speak to your heart.

2.) Some grief may be appropriate for those who are really close to the leader

Just like when you lose any good friend or mentor, grief is a normal part of coping with the loss of a pastor. You can be sad and disappointed. You may even cry and feel a little uneasy about the future. But you should not allow your grief to overwhelm you.

In public, people should only discuss the matter in a way that is uplifting and brings unity. While they should never deny their feelings, they should always realize that their feelings may be unduly influenced by the sting of the moment. God's Spirit not emotions must guide the discussion. One key thing to remember is to not take the decision by the pastor as a sign of personal rejection. Normally, the decision has everything to do with him/her and God's call on his/her life, not the local fellowship. By internalizing the situation, you may be inadvertently creating a negative situation that does not really exist.

3.) Don't measure progress week to week, look way down the road

Not every sermon your old pastor preached was dynamite. Don't expect the new leadership to hit a home run every week either. Making comparisons can be a bad place to start your new journey. Instead of focusing on the progress from week to week, you need to realize that the development of a healthy fellowship is a long distance race with many challenges along the way. Don't give up too early and lose out on the prize.

4.) Repent of corporate sin

More than likely you will discover negative attitudes or sin in the fellowship as people process through the changes. You may find that people idolized the old pastor too much. You may discover that many of the people were spiritually lazy. You may discover that others were not willing to serve or had too high expectations for leaders. You may find that people came to the church for the wrong reasons. You may find that there were hidden camps under the surface all along that have allowed for disunity to exist. Any sin in the church must be confessed and repented for as a church. In most cases, this requires some sort of corporate service/time of repentance.

A prophet or pastor in your fellowship may need to bring a strong word of admonishment for the fellowship. Of course, this must be done in love and at the right time. Sometimes repentance must come a while after the moment because the grief can get in the way, especially at the beginning.

5.) Think on these things

One of the great challenges in life is for God to renew our mind and to think only on things that are true. The Bible encourages us to be careful what we spend a lot of time thinking about.

Philippians 4:8 - *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.*

When you have a thought, you should ask the following: Is it true? Is it pure? Is it lovely? Does it give praise and honor to God? If the thought does not pass the above test, it should not be allowed to captivate a Christian's mind. While this is hard to do, it can be done as we read the Word, pray and take our struggles to God. You choose what you believe about yourself and others.

6.) Take personal responsibility for the health of the fellowship

Worry is not a godly response; faith is released as we take action to build up God's work in His churches. Instead of focusing on others, concentrate on what you can do to improve the leadership void. This may be prayer, keeping a positive attitude, serving in new areas, or simply refusing to get caught up in the anxiety of the moment. If you do not spend time regularly in the word and prayer, start doing these things.

The only thing you really have control over is you. Focus on that, everything else will take care of itself. God is still sovereign and on His throne. He is faithful to bring new leaders.

7.) Manage expectations, be realistic

Frustration stems from unmet expectations. People need to be realistic about the skills of existing leaders, evaluate the needs that must be filled by the vacancy and realize that pastors are only human. By keeping a level head and realistic expectations, people will avoid putting themselves into losing situations.

8.) Pick replacement leaders, ask congregation to pray and consider how they can serve

Interim leaders will need to be selected and empowered. The scope of their duties and powers must be clearly explained. The ministry of the church continues on, and people should step up to fill any void that exists.

9.) Keep your eyes on Jesus

If the fellowship keeps its eyes on Jesus, it won't have time to focus on the storm. Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith not any one man. We must always keep things in perspective and realize that God is faithful. Worship should be a big part of the services, especially as the leader is leaving and new leadership is transitioning to the pulpit.

The loss of a leader may be the exact thing that is needed to bring revival to a local fellowship. This may be especially true if the old leader stood in the way of what God wanted to do. A new spirit of freedom can actually spring forth as people seek to listen for God's voice on their own.

10.) Give each other extra grace all the way around

Don't be quick to pick at the service or criticize interim leaders. Instead, pray for them and give them grace. They likely have to do things that they have never had to do before. Remember this if the service has glitches or some ministries get dropped for the moment.

11.) Continue to meet needs of people and celebrate God's work in their lives

People have needs and these don't go away just because the pastor does. Leaders should pray for the congregation and really focus on altar time during the transition. Leaders should be available to help people through the time of transition and help them focus on Jesus. Also, the fellowship should celebrate whatever God does in people during the transition. Make sure to have testimonies and sharing time during services. This celebration may include throwing parties and doing social activities that help the people bond more with each other during the transition.

12.) Quickly work to find a new pastor

Doing nothing about finding new leadership is a prescription for disillusionment. People will take that as a sign that the church is going backward and not forward. Although the church council may not find a new pastor for a long time, the process of looking for a new pastor should begin pretty soon after the announcement is made. There should be no rush or sense of urgency. You don't have to take the first guy who looks qualified. The leadership must pray, listen and do what the Spirit directs. However, this does not happen without intentionality. God will provide in time. But we can make His job harder if we sit around and do nothing. There should be a commitment to act and move on.

13.) Don't focus on why

One of the worst questions that you can ask yourself is, "Why did this happen to me?" Most situations have a lot of reasons for why they just so happen to unfold. You may never know the complete reason for why someone does what they do. I live in my body 24/7 and sometimes I struggle to understand my thought process. "Why" tends to be a negative focus usually based on our personal hunches and biases.

14.) Focus on the what

Ask, "What does God want me to learn from the situation?" Think about how you can grow as the fellowship morphs into a new season of leadership. See this as an opportunity instead of a problem.