

A Graceful Exit: The Pastor's Inevitable Move

Early in my ministry I was faced with a decision that I didn't want to make. I had been an associate pastor at a growing church in the perfect city of Camelot. And although, the Knights of the Round Table and I all had great vision for Camelot, Arthur's vision began to veer... I could see tragedy on the horizon; but my thoughts were not being heard and I chose to leave Camelot ... it was a hard move for both myself and my family; but I know that it was the right one.

I have talked to many pastors in transition over the years. It is not always enjoyable, but often very necessary to move. The time of transition doesn't have to be torture... here are some thoughts that you should keep in mind whenever a transition is in order.

The Pastoral Spotlight in Perspective:

First things first: Understanding the Role

Get a good job description. Most pastors have one, but is it clear and doable? Yes, you are called to ministry, but each ministry has its own peculiarities that you must deal with as a part of your work. Some churches have vague a job description, which puts the pastor and his family in potential financial and emotional stress. If the expectations of your duties are constantly changing, take some time to clarify both for yourself, your staff and your family what you understand your role in that ministry to be. Communication can prevent resentment from expectations that you never knew you were meant to meet.

Looking for the life time achievement award?

Several risks face the lifetime preacher: your spiritual fervor may result in fever. Early career zealotry may blow up and cause burn out. Do you really want to be a pastor for 40 years? That's a lot of board meetings. What impact will it have on your family? How prepared are you? I became a pastor in my early 20's, as have others, but there are trade-offs and impacts. Think about what's really important to you.

As Director/Actor Eastwood would say, "A man has to know his limitations". Everyone has strengths and weaknesses. Take the time to know yours. The three major roles of a pastor are Leader, Lover, Speaker... you must serve in all these areas, but which is your strongest, favorite and weakest? In my own ministry I have found myself to be more of a leader and less of a lover. To compensate, I developed various strategies of love: (Example: I made a point to learn every name of church members, regulars and new comers.... how? I took pictures of people as we first met with their permission and wrote their names down in order of appearance on the film. I then used the developed pictures as flashcards. While taking the picture I would often make the joke, "This is my photographic memory..." Most people found this strange name obsession, not only personable, but endearing. As a leader driven person, I liked its personal touch!)

A pastor can be asked to provide a wide variety of services but always ask yourself if you are working on the priorities you enjoy? There is no rule that says ministry has to be misery. If you are primarily utilizing the gifts God gave you, your relationship with your church will be healthier and longer lasting. Learn to say, "no" when it's not your gift or when your schedule is packed. There is NO shame in getting a stunt double. Just because you CAN do it, doesn't obligate you to do it. Just because the last pastor did it, doesn't mean you do it. Don't be afraid to delegate! Make friends with Christian counselors and send copious referrals after the first triage appointment. Reorganize your staff duties. Think outside the box!!

Offstage and outside the theatrics

A few years back, I had a pastor tell me the following foreboding words, "Get a life". At first, I was defensive and then realized he was correct. I had no hobbies, didn't take much vacation and stayed too much in "church world." After taking a two-month sabbatical a few years back, I see the church and my life differently. You'll be stronger by spending time with family and friends, having hobbies, taking vacations and exercising. Life outside the church can help you keep perspective on what is going on inside your church. It may even inspire you, and/or prepare you to read your positive and negative reviews...

Reviews - a double edged sword.

Our publicists say it's a blockbuster, but the critics claim it bombed!

There is nothing harder for the pastor to receive than a negative job evaluation, but it will serve you well if done properly and regularly. Get it in writing. It's hard to know who to listen to. Sunday morning maybe full of acclamations and the board room full of condemnations, but if you are not hearing BOTH you are not hearing everything. Ask for an evaluation! You can always learn more about how to do your job better, meet the needs of the church better, and maybe learn that you are not the one best suited for their needs (BEFORE they do). A good resource for an unbiased opinion is always your first time visitor. They have no agenda and every reason to be honest. So, have first time attenders "first impression" post cards sent out with the welcome letter (self-addressed with postage is an added way to ensure feedback). Using the evaluation process to assist is going to give you a good barometer of where you stand. I don't know how many times I have been told by other pastors, "I didn't see it coming." No one likes surprises or guess work in this situation. Predict their vote before there is a vote. Better to know where you stand and deal with that.

The Final Act - Don't forget the nature of show biz.

You can be replaced if the script suddenly leans towards a different vision. You may be called of God to ministry, but in the eyes of some, you are hired help. It is a business relationship. While you may be friendly with church members, they are not your best friends. It is their church and they will do what is necessary to live there in peace.

Pastors come and go; the season ticket holders don't give up their seats.

Better to leave a church too soon than too late. The old saying, "familiarity breeds contempt," is true for many pastors. Tenure is undervalued and every day you probably irritated someone. You can't make everyone happy all the time. Remember, your friends come and go, but your enemies accumulate. Have your transition plan in place now. Odds are you will resign (I mean in transition) at some point. Get ready. Know the contacts you will use now. Understand the process and your needs before you're in the middle. Prepare your family now. Trying to explain everything in a time of crisis to family is difficult and not fully successful. Tell them that some day you may have to move and how it works. Remember, on the average, pastors last less than five years. Make sure you have funds put away to handle a move. Is there a plan so a child can finish the school year? What would the impact be on a spouse's job? How fast can you get out of your house? Think through these issues you will face **in advance**. Be prepared. God bless you as you prepare! So, get a life: often times the key to a successful transition is having a healthy life outside the church. Your stability OUTSIDE your current job (yes, ministry; yes, a calling... but don't forget it is a job) often guarantees your sanity at the conclusion of that position.

Top Exit Signs: do any/all of these apply to you?

1. I've been working so hard, I can't even remember what my gifts are.
2. You'd rather hang by your toenails than look at the annual evaluation.
3. Board meetings are more stressful than your Greek finals were.
4. Let's just say the mail you're getting, isn't fan mail anymore.
5. People suddenly pause and begin discussing the weather when you approach their conversation.
6. The Denominational Executive casually asks if your resume has been updated lately.
7. Attendance is decreasing... even on Christmas and Easter!
8. Other churches start placing your name on their prayer chain.
9. Your family/spouse also feel like their taking your Greek finals (don't forget they haven't studied).
10. Folks have stopped approaching you after worship service to the extent you have begun questioning your deodorant's effectiveness.
11. Complaints about the service (or certain portion of the service) being too short while another says it's too long. This signals you are not pleasing anyone!
12. Church and board members alike have begun to question whether or not you came to the church for spiritual reasons or for their AWESOME pot luck fellowship dinners.

Quick Tips on the Emergency Exits:

If you are in a state of transition by force then networking amongst your friends, families and contacts is the first step. If you are still ready to be a pastor, don't make rush career decisions after passing through the emergency exit door.

Career Transition Tip #1 - Don't follow Johnny Carson... even Leno couldn't do it right.

Even a healthy church may have an unhealthy transition when a godly pastor has retired after serving for 15 or more years. It is best to leave a church in that situation to an interim pastor for at least two years... add an extra six months for every year above 16 years the previous pastor served for.

#2 Avoid the Apollo... Some churches go through pastors regularly. Don't think you are Superman and go there. Fleeing or getting fired from a church only to go to a toxic church is unwise. Also, remember that just because the church may be in a nice location to live doesn't mean the church is a good place to work. Often, the nicer the place, the higher the expectations.

After an emergency exit you may feel you never want to be behind the pulpit again. Take heart. You are not the first church leader to under go this experience. And although you may not choose to continue your role as a pastor at the moment, do not rule yourself out of ministry all together. You may find your experience leads you to unique places where you can continue your ministry... maybe from a slightly different role. Even the Apostle Paul made tents for a couple of years.

Also, give yourself time and space (as well as your family) to exit the church emotionally. Do not try to play the blame game... neither the church nor you are completely at fault. Usually the transition is mutual on several levels. When discussing the transition with friends and church members, focus on a mutual difference in vision for the church.

Don't forget to steer clear of gossips... They may come to you in earnest; however, their tongues can be disastrous to your heart, soul and career!

Friends to share the lime-light and the low light:

The mistake most pastors make is trying to handle the transition alone. Get help; you'll do better. Keep your resume up to date, your agent's number on speed dial and watch for good opportunities. Also, if you have been there and you know someone who is there right now, reach out! Calling our brother pastors in trouble or in transition is viewed as valuable by those receiving the calls. Peer support is critical. Take the time. You may need the calls some day.