



M I C H I G A N
M I N I S T R Y
N E T W O R K

WHEN PEOPLE LEAVE
E-BOOK

Welcome,

As Network Superintendent one of my goals is to assist pastors live healthy lives. One way to do this is to offer support when pastors struggle through the hurts of people leaving your church.

Pastors are left with questions and confusion. There are feelings of betrayal, concerns about whom it may affect, a sense of failure, and worry about the future of your ministry and or church.

This e-book is designed to provide care and to give practical ways to say goodbye well.

May God bless your every step,

Aaron Hlavin
Assemblies of God
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Superintendent

INTRODUCTION

Let's get started

Gut punch! That is what it often feels like when you hear those dreaded words, "Pastor, we feel it is time for us to leave and go to another church."

Immediately thoughts to race through your mind. We say and do the right things (at least I hope we do). But inside the race for emotional control has begun.

We can feel a wide range of emotions. Anger, despair, confusion, frustration, insecurity. We can even start questioning ourselves or even our desire to continue in ministry.

Some do not struggle in this area as much as others, but all of us have had those individuals leave our church who really was with us. We knew them well. We walked through a trial with them. We loved deeply. And it HURTS!

Our minds race with thoughts like:

- What did I do wrong?
- What is wrong with our church?
- Are they mad at someone or about something?
- Why are they *really* leaving?
- What does this mean for our church?
- What ministries will suffer?
- Who *else* might be leaving?

Then, the hurt kick in and our thoughts to:

- "Why did I invest so much time in them only to have them leave?"
- "I thought they were committed and were with us."
- "I hope they leave quietly."
- "They better not cause us any trouble."

This e-book is designed to assist you in moving through difficult "goodbyes" with grace, recovery, and healing.

WHEN THEY LEAVE WELL

THOUGHTS ON HOW TO RELATIONALLY SAY GOODBYE

People leave for many various reasons. Most of the time what they share with you is not the whole story, and that is a good thing. It shows that they are attempting to be kind, and gracious and truly do care about you. So they soften the blow and attempt to preserve the relationship.

Sometimes people leave for reasons such as:

- Move to a new home
- Job transfer
- Retirement
- Loss of a loved one (need of family support)
- Closer to family
- To care for an ailing parent
- A shift in their spiritual journey

Even when leaving for an understandable reason, it still feels sad. It can feel like a step backward for the church. Also, it can feel personal. Even when we understand the reason, the emotions are real.

When people leave to go to another church, remember that they didn't make that decision lightly.

There is a simple truth we must accept: **It is ok for people to leave.** In fact, it may even be God's will for them, for you, and for your church. Whatever the reason, how they leave and how you help them leave matters.

Here are some things to do to make a departure easier:

- 1. Don't treat those leaving well as if they are leaving poorly.** How you respond to those leaving will strengthen or weaken your leadership. When people choose to leave well, be careful to not make them feel wrong for leaving. Remember that their friends will watch how you say goodbye.
- 2. Respond to them with kindness and care.** We must not be defensive, insensitive, or uncaring in our response to those leaving. Remember you are called to love people in your church as well as people *leaving* your church. The circumstances must not change our calling to love well.
- 3. Bless them.** One thing that you can do is to bless them as they leave. This is not only a Biblical approach, but it is also a decent thing to do. Use words that affirm, uplift, and show gratitude for the opportunity to be their pastor. Here are a few things you can do to send them off well:

- **Be warm and normal.** Don't get weird and don't be emotionally cold. You may feel the temptation to do so but resist it.
 - **Pray with and for them.** Doing this reminds both parties that God has always been the center of your relationship. Keeping God at the center is healthy for everyone involved.
 - **Send a follow up letter.** Sending a follow up letter answers questions that may exist in their mind. Often people wonder if the pastor is mad at them. Sending a letter helps settle this as well as builds a bridge should they ever desire to return. We have a sample letter in the "Sample Letter Section" of this document.
4. **Steward your words and emotions.** Speak well of them. Remember that what you say about them, will most likely get back to them. This can turn healthy departure into an unhealthy one. Make sure you speak about them in the same manner you expect them to speak about you.
 5. **Be confidential.** There is no reason to share private information or details regarding their departure. Even when people ask you, and they most likely will simply share that they no longer attend, and you wish them well.
 6. **Encourage them to find a healthy church.** The only thing worse than someone leaving is if they do not go to another church. If they ask, refer them to a few places that are healthy, Bible-believing churches. You want them in church, even if it is not yours.
 7. **Love the people who are still at the church.** Resist the urge to lose trust, invest less, or not serve others. The temptation is to "protect" your heart from getting too close to others. This can cause you to seem distant and will rob you of the chance to be blessed by and be a blessing to others.
 8. **Be willing to give them a letter of transfer if requested.** Be prompt in writing a good letter of transfer to another church. This is a great way to secure goodwill and show your support for them and their family. We have a sample letter in the "Sample Letter Section" of this document."
 9. **Remind them they are always welcome back.** A Pastor would be wise to offer an easy return should they desire to do so. That also can settle in their minds that there is no animosity.

WHEN THEY LEAVE POORLY

HOW TO SAY GOODBYE TO DIFFICULT PEOPLE

Occasionally, you will encounter individuals who do not leave well. It is common that every ministry leader will deal with people who cause problems, criticize, or control as they leave. These are incredibly difficult and painful situations. These situations must be handled with extreme care and concern.

Here are a few thoughts when facing a situation like this.

- 1. Don't ignore what you feel.** Feeling is a healthy thing. It is more dangerous to ignore, diminish or go numb than it is to feel deeply. The fact that you feel means you're alive and you are working through the pain. We must face the hurts of ministry if we are ever to move through them.
- 2. Don't let what you feel lead you.** In times like these, it's easy to let emotions run the show. Jeremiah 17:9 says: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (NIV) Remember that sometimes we just need to stand on the promises and trust in Jesus.
- 3. Jesus experienced hurt as well.** Jesus faced disappointment from those He led and loved deeply. We know that the Bible is filled with many stories of betrayal and actions that left pain in the hearts of God's people. Knowing this reminds us that we are walking in the footsteps of one who gets it.
- 4. They are leavening...so let them leave your mind.** Every day we choose a way! We choose to focus on what we think about. Way too often we repeatedly think about a person who has left long after they have gone. We must choose, even when we don't naturally want to, to let them leave our minds and heart. One preacher said: bitterness and resentment that are not dealt with is allowing someone to live rent-free in your mind. Set yourself free!
- 5. Focus on the good in your life.** Each day wake up and focus on three things you are thankful for. Do this throughout your day. This daily habit will help "reset" your mind. Remember, we first form our habits and then out habits form us.
- 6. Put some praise in your problem.** Spend time with God. It is essential for you to spend more time with God than focusing on what is wrong.

Psalm 34:1-4 says: "I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. I will glory in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together. I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears.

David reminds us that we should praise God in all circumstances. Praise should fill our hearts every day, no matter how good or bad life seems. This is especially true when we are walking through seasons of struggle.

- 7. Decide to grow...not go.** Don't let someone else's leaving cause you to want to leave your assignment. Human nature is to fight or flee. Even if this is a natural response, remember God called you there. Do not give up on God's plan for your life or give any individual that much say over your life.
- 8. Remind yourself that people still love you and support your ministry.** There are many people who are supportive of you. Focus on those who are still there, serving, and supporting you and the church. Way too often the voice of the negative one drowns out the voices of the supportive ones. Loud doesn't equal large.
- 9. God may be protecting your future.** You have no idea what you may have been spared from. If you are praying for your church and the ministry, then it is possible that the Lord has answered your prayers. This may be a *good*, painful thing, instead of just a painful thing.
- 10. Someday you will leave as well.** Short of an end-of-life situation, you will eventually leave your church as well. It is very unlikely that you will pastor in one place your whole life. Keeping this in mind may help you have grace for those who feel their time has come.
- 11. You are responsible for your response, not their actions.** We cannot control what others do, but we can control ourselves. It often seems easier to manage someone else than it is to manage yourself. During difficult departures, all we can do is make sure we look inward before we look outward. We cannot bring health to a situation until we are healthy first.

OVERCOMING EMOTIONAL HURTS

THOUGHTS ON HOW TO MOVE FORWARD

Moving through and beyond hurt is a necessary challenge. If we get stuck in hurt, we will eventually do things that can hurt others. Being a leader requires that we lead. Sometimes leading means that we will be misunderstood, misrepresented, and maligned. Below are some thoughts on how to navigate this.

1. **God has not abandoned you.** When we go through pain, we must not blame our divine God because of a flawed human-caused pain. God is not your problem. He is your solution.
2. **Resist the urge to close off, disconnect and decide you're done with people.** Disengaging from ministry/life will only hurt you and cause others to feel disconnected from you. It is an understandable response, but one that removes you from your God-given purpose.
3. **Give yourself space to grieve.** Understand that moving through hurt takes time. You didn't develop that relationship in a moment, and you will not move beyond it in a moment. You may even experience an emotional jolt every time you hear their name mentioned. Sometimes it just takes time.
4. **Understand the church is not as fragile as you may think.** We worry that people leaving our church will have a ripple effect. The truth is that most times it doesn't. Remember that this is God's church, and He loves and protects it better than we can.
5. **Understand that life will be difficult, but God can be trusted.** This is an opportunity for you and God to grow deeper in your relationship. It is through those difficult moments that we find the strength of God and His faithfulness to us. God will walk you through this if you allow Him to.
6. **Recognize that some people will be short-term attendees.** Part of church life involves "hellos" and goodbyes." You will always have short-termers in your church.
7. **Recognize that this is just part of ministry.** This has happened before and will happen again. The good news is that you survived this before and will do so again. It is just a part of being in ministry.

8. **Forgiveness is a process worth pursuing.** Conflict resolution can often be elusive. We must learn to move forward without it. How do we do this? We forgive. Forgiveness is a step-by-step choice to move toward healing. We are never more like Christ than when we forgive.

Colossians 3:13

“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” (ESV)

9. **Understand that hurt has the potential to develop you in a deeper way.** Romans 5:3 says: “³Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces, perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” (NIV) God has the potential to move you through this formula to arrive at hope, but we must persevere first. As we persevere through the suffering our character deepens. We then grow in our confidence in God and ourselves. The result is hope. Allow God to walk you through this season.
10. **Rely on your Network to support you.** You are surrounded by other ministers who have been through similar seasons. Reach out, talk, and allow them to support you. They understand like no one else. That is the benefit of a Network and one that should be utilized.

SAMPLE LETTERS THAT MAY HELP

10 AREAS

LETTER TO FAMILY LEAVING WELL

[date]

[Name of Family],

I just wanted to send you a brief note to say thank you for sharing your heart for your future. I know transitioning to a new church is difficult, but I wanted to encourage you that you have begun the process with incredible integrity and concern to do things right.

If I have learned one thing in life it is that God honors those who do the right things. You will be blessed, and I am proud to have been your pastor.

I will be praying for you that God helps you in your new church home. I know you will be a blessing there as you have been to so many others here at [church name], including myself.

I know one thing for sure; someone will be one lucky person to get to be your Pastor!

While it is always sad when someone leaves, just know you always have a home here at [church name] and are welcome back should you desire.

With much love,

Pastor [pastor & spouse name]

LETTER MEMBERSHIP TRANSFER

[date]

[Name of Pastor],

Greetings in His love!

[Name of transfer couple/individual] has requested that their membership be transferred from our congregation to yours. They have been involved in several ministries while they have been a part of our congregation. They are members in good standing.

OR

[Name of transfer couple/individual] are members in good standing. I am glad to know that they have already become a part of your fellowship. I trust they will be a blessing by becoming a vital part of what God is doing within your congregation.

God bless you!

[Name of Pastor]