

Leaving Well



Making the decision to leave a church family is a difficult process filled with conflicting emotions, some positive and some painful. Harder still, once you have made the decision, is to actually take your leave well.

It is easy in these situations to think that the best thing to do is make a quick and clean exit in order not to hurt people. In fact, the opposite is the case. Quick exits often complicate the pain felt by everyone. It is analogous to a 'sudden unexpected death'.

Leaving relationships, especially conflicted ones, involves very real grieving for you and for those remaining. People who take the time to prepare to leave well via the 'front door' rather than simply 'disappearing out the back door', find the process more healthy and less debilitating for the future, i.e. they carry less pain with them. To disregard your emotional needs and the needs of the community you leave creates feelings of abandonment, betrayal and frustration. It is well worth choosing the pathway of love and courage and leaving well.

Even though the leaving may be hard, this pathway is life-giving. It enables the next important process in your life – saying 'hello' to a new community and also allows you to visit your old community with dignity and acceptance. While this helps you as the one leaving it also ministers to those left behind, enabling them to welcome a new person without unfinished business with their previous pastor.

Principles to recall in leaving well:

Don't just walk away without considering the transition, your people and your own self care.

The most important decision you make after deciding to go is deciding how you will leave. It is crucial at this point that you don't run away or just let it happen without intentional thought. Commit yourself to saying 'goodbye' well. Leaving is a significant event in your life and the life of the community you have related to. The choice you make to leave well communicates that you care about people even through the process of leaving them. It also allows future interactions to be healthy. Importantly, it is good for you and doesn't build up resentment, self-justification and disillusionment. If leaving is complicated or occurs after a long ministry, many leaders have found walking the journey with a counsellor or mentor is well worthwhile.

Recommendation 1: Journey the leaving process with a counsellor or mentor.

Give some consideration to how and when the decision is shared with people especially if it is likely to come as a surprise.

Remember that once the announcement of your leaving is made, your relationship with people begins to change. Don't make it too early or you will lose the ability to continue to lead, don't talk people too close to your leaving date or you do not allow enough time for transition planning. Most pastors find no earlier than 6 months and no later with 3 months is around the right time frame. Sharing with the lay leadership and staff team a few days before the Sunday announcement is wise. Many have found

the 'Friday leak' a useful practice. This way key relationships are affirmed. However these individuals need to be committed to confidentiality.

Recommendation 2: Give a careful pastorally sensitive, but clear, announcement of your leaving around 3 months before you conclude.

It is important for the community to have the opportunity to be active in saying 'goodbye'. Communities sometimes withdraw emotionally from a leader who announces his or her departure. It is as important for the community as for the leader, and his or her family, to be intentional about creating a healthy closure for themselves. Those leaving sometimes think it is fine for those left behind "they are OK, they've got each other, it's us who are hurting". Whereas those left often feel the opposite, "it's OK for them they are going somewhere new, we have been the ones left to pick up the pieces". Again some churches consider engaging a church consultancy team to assist them process the transition of the pastor well. If the community is not in a place to take initiative, a leaving pastor may have to accept responsibility to arrange some aspects of the transition otherwise they may not happen.

If the leaving is healthy and planned, and a new leader is ready to start, consider a short and defined hand over period. If this is well done it can provide a positive transition experience for all the parties involved.

Recommendation 3: Once the announcement is made make your number priority 'leaving well'.

Keep working, complete tasks well and tidy up loose ends.

While it is common for church members to withdraw a little from a pastor who is leaving, it is important for the pastor to be committed to leaving the church in the best possible shape for the future. This means

not losing energy, vision and direction in the last few months before completion. While this is certainly not the time for new projects, it is the time for completing ministry tasks and projects well. Tie up loose ends and don't leave things undone. Complete projects, fulfil commitments and keep promises. Where things are unable to be completed make sure this is dealt with clearly and the expectations of everyone are clarified. Consider preaching a farewell set of sermons aimed at preparing the church for the future.

Recommendation 4: Complete, finish, wrap up and leave ongoing or developing projects in a good place.

Affirm important relationships

As you prepare to leave, it is important to give time to meet with the key people in your life who will be affected by your leaving. Remember the good and tough times you have had together. Celebrate and reminisce together. This is the time to thank people for what they have done for you personally. It may be good to share a meal together, to pray, and even to exchange small symbolic gifts if the relationship has been particularly important.

- You may call some to say a personal goodbye.
- Others may need a letter.
- Some you will want to personally visit.

This is also the time to lay down any unresolved issues that you may have (don't carry them on into a new situation). Let go of any anger and disappointment you may have experienced. Offer and ask for forgiveness. It is better to be honest and open here than to walk away with hurt which takes years to resolve. If you are conscious of carrying things away with you, see a counsellor or spiritual director to deal with these issues.

If the move away is the result of conflict, then it is important that the issues are named and understood. Be clear about your reasons for going. It is probable that if you are moving, these cannot now be resolved easily, however the relationships still need to be affirmed and careful goodbyes need to be said.

In some situations, especially if there have been formal relationships like supervision or mentoring it may be important to be clear about how the relationship that you have with people will change. Again it is important to communicate your expectations up front about future contact.

Recommendation 5: Affirm people by saying an appropriate farewell to each person personally with whom you have had an important relationship.

Allow yourself time to grieve

Saying 'goodbye' to others involves very real grieving for you and the community you leave behind. Allow yourself adequate time to work this through. There are significant emotions aroused in grief and you may need to be aware of these and how they will affect you and your family. Grieving takes 8 – 18 months in times like this and where relationships have been very significant, it can take considerably longer. Again, some people find that gaining the help of counsellor, skilled in grief work, is very valuable to bring good closure to a situation.

If you have been through grief before and know your patterns of grieving, then you will be more comfortable with what is happening. If this is the first time you have said 'goodbye' in this way, it may be useful to read something on grief or find people to support you through the journey. Counselling is highly recommended for people who have had long membership or ministries in leadership with a church.

The four key tasks of grieving are:

- a) Accepting the reality of your loss. Our first reaction is denial that this is really happening or that it means this much to us.
- b) Experiencing the pain of the loss: There are many emotions including: anger, relief, sadness, guilt, helplessness, loneliness, depression and hope.
- c) Adjusting to a new situation where the old relationships, supports, expectations and sense of community are no longer there.
- d) Slowly reinvesting emotional energy and connectedness to new people and a new community.

These tasks appear at first glance to be sequential but in reality aspects of each may be experienced together or in parallel.

Try not to move into new ministries or responsibilities too quickly. Allow time for transition so that you have the emotional energy to start well in a new place.

The farewell

Some sort of public farewell is usual even in difficult circumstances. This gives opportunity for a community of people to acknowledge your contribution to church life, ministry and to say 'goodbye' publicly. This should not be artificial but it is important in that it is the public marker of your leaving. Enjoy this time and use it well to bring good closure.

Again if there are difficulties in leaving, choose to be gracious in your involvement but not untruthful or compromising. If your leaving is over difficult issues, try not to let these obscure the years of enjoyable fellowship you will have had. Make your parting shot one of love that builds people rather than a reaction of hurt that is intended to pay back. Do not seek justification at this point.

For the community organising the farewell, it is important that those chosen to be involved are not in primary conflict with those leaving. The farewell must have integrity and honesty if it is to do its job of providing a means to a healthy closure. For the community it is important that those leaving are recognised for the contribution they have made to life of the community. This may be difficult if the leaving is following conflict, but it is important that it is done meaningfully and well.

Recommendation 6: Use the farewell to thank and bless the church for their sharing with you.

Really leave

If you have closed well, you are free to really leave. Go home and mark in some way to yourself or as a family the fact that you are no longer the leader or even members of this community. If you return, be clear that you are in a new role as a visitor from time to time. Enjoy visiting but do not expect to just fit in as you did before. Your leaving among many other things will mean that the community will never be the same.

It is usual for ministers to hand over the responsibility for weddings, funerals and special events to incoming minister. There may be the need for special consideration in some situations and this should be worked out between yourself and the new minister.

Leaving well is worth the time and effort it takes. It is good for you and good for the community you leave. Poor closure or an abrupt ugly departure leaves wounds that can take years to heal. Tragically, even the Christian world is painfully full of people who continue to find it hard to relate to others because they are hurting after being left or leaving without enough care.

Recommendation 7: Sit down now and write a first draft of your farewell letter (it is good

to actually give a final version to everyone as you leave). Writing it is a great way to start the process well and it creates lots of reflection in the process.

Take time to say “goodbye” and you will find it easy to say “hello”. As a wise counsellor once commented: “The whole of life is saying “goodbye” and “hello”, we may as well learn to do it well.”

Sample: A Letter from your Senior Pastor

How does one end ??? years of pastoral ministry here somewhat gracefully expressing my deep thanks for the journey we have all taken together?

Through the last few months, my wife (husband) N and I have been preparing for this leave-taking. We are deeply thankful and appreciative for the many kind and generous affirmations we have received from you all.

It is a still however a sobering reality for both N and myself that come the 1st December, we will continue to remain friends to many of you but I will no longer be your senior pastor. I recognise this will be a significant change for me and also for you. For leadership, pastoral care, vision and teaching, you will look to to a new Senior Pastor, and until he or she is appointed, to those in this church designated to fulfil these ministries.

I have deeply appreciated the loyalty and support you have offered me as your pastor and I now look to you to give this same commitment to the new senior pastor you will appoint.

I give thanks for all of you and for the journey we have shared together over many years. As our partnership in the gospel at ... church draws to its end, I trust God would bless, guide, and provide for you as you enter a new partnership with a new senior pastor.

With my blessings on taking my leave.....

Name

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