

Pastoral Resignation: When You're On Your Way Out

Background

In April of 2010, I announced my resignation as Lead Pastor of a thriving congregation that I loved. We were experiencing significant God-momentum, with more people coming to faith in Christ and coming to our weekend services than ever before in our 95 year history. We were serving our community in substantial ways. Yet, I sensed God was calling me to another place of ministry. Pastors don't usually leave when momentum and congregational love is at a heightened level, but I did.

That church has been without a Lead Pastor now for several months at the time of this writing. Four staff pastors continue to lead the church with skill and integrity, as they rotate the preaching and share the leadership load. Some might think that a local church would tank without a senior leader, but the church continues to thrive in worship vibrancy and missional vitality. I am convinced that the church's present health is due, in part, to how we weathered the transition from the announcement of my resignation until my last day as pastor 10 weeks later. If you are planning on resigning from the church you serve, here are some things to keep in mind on your way out.

-Ride *Out* the Wave of Emotions

The weekend I announced my resignation was one of the most difficult moments of my pastoral ministry. I was convinced that once I announced my resignation, my sense of relief would increase and my grief would decrease. Such was not the case. I did have moments of extreme excitement about the new ministry before me. At other times, however, I was deeply saddened by the thought of leaving a group of people I had come to love. There was no easy way to navigate the variety of emotions I was encountering, but I did try to keep a couple things in mind. First, I tried not to get so excited about where I was heading that I didn't finish well where I was serving. Additionally, I tried to avoid becoming so sad about leaving that I didn't prepare internally for the coming transition. By God's grace, on most days I was able to avoid both extreme excitement and extreme sadness. While I allowed myself to feel the various emotions, I tried to be sure that my emotions did not detract from the congregation's healthy processing of my resignation. Of course, on my last weekend as pastor I cried like a baby; I couldn't help it even if I tried. My tears were, however, ones of healthy celebration, love, and release and not guilt, manipulation, and regret.

My congregation was dealing with their own emotional roller-coaster as well. I was not prepared for the wide array of emotional responses within the church. I expected the sadness, shock, and disappointment that the congregation felt, but I wasn't ready for the anger that a handful of good, loving people vented. I remember one of these people, a guy my age whose first Sunday at the church happened to be my first Sunday as pastor. I met with this friend weekly during his early days in Christ, walked with him through the pain of his divorce, officiated at his wedding, and dedicated his first born son. After my resignation, I heard second-hand that this friend was angry. He would not return my calls, text messages, or emails. He accused me of abandoning the church for greener pastures and threatened to look for a new church, even though he had been a very active member. I was not only surprised by his angry response to my resignation, I was crushed that he would question my motives for leaving. This person knew me better than most people in the church. I was hurt until I came to realize that some people treat a pastoral resignation like a

death; some get angry, some get sad, and some get both. It is important to allow everyone to ride out the wave of emotions they may feel, even if those emotions seem unreasonable. Many of those who seem angry will, after some processing, move from anger and sadness to celebration and support of you and your new ministry opportunity.

What can you do to ride out the emotional wave you and your church are experiencing on your way out?

-Stay Out of the Pastoral Search

One of the hardest but most necessary commitments of the resigning lead pastor is to stay out of the pastoral search as much as possible. This is easier said than done. This congregation and I had experienced a significant turnaround over the years that we were together. The church had nearly tripled in size and, more importantly, developed a missional posture toward the community. In short, God had taken this group of people a long way and I didn't want any incoming pastor messing things up. Sure I cared and wanted to know who the search committee was considering. I never solicited information, but it did come to me several times. When it did, it was an overwhelming temptation to say about prospects, "that person would be a perfect fit" or "that pastor will take us backwards for sure." Although these thoughts went through my mind, I never verbalized them to members of the search committee, even when they wanted to know what I thought.

I stayed out of the details of the search but I did offer some general tips to the search committee and board. I made sure to include important items on our monthly board meeting agenda. I helped the leaders identify the congregation's missional DNA and what kind of pastor will match and enhance the congregational DNA. I also initiated discussions focused on how to welcome and encourage the new pastor and his/her family.

What can you do to stay out of the pastoral search process on your way out?

-Hang Out with People

After I announced my resignation, a part of me wanted to stay in my cave (the office) and hide out for two months until my last day of work. Plus, I had lots of administrative loose ends to tie, not to mention an overly cluttered office to pack up. I knew in my gut, however, that the best use of my time between the announcement of my resignation and my last day of work was to spend time with people.

A resigning pastor, especially in a large church, cannot hang out with everyone. Who do you spend time with when your time at the church is running out? I focused my time on three groups of people: people who invested as much in me as I did in them (friends), people who represented the backbone of the church's future (leaders), and people who needed some of the dignity that life circumstances had stolen from them (marginalized). Some individuals fit into all three groups.

There were several individuals and couples in our church who had impacted me and my family in profound ways. Some were like grandparents to our three small children. Others were more than just church congregants; they were friends. While it was impossible to "hang out" with all of these friends, I was able to grab a few minutes with many of them.

The second group of people I sought some time with when my time was running out was leaders. This group included present leaders such as pastoral staff, board members, and key ministry

leaders. Additionally, I was intentional about not only meeting with present leaders but potential leaders as well. When I announced my resignation I was most concerned about how potential leaders might respond. Some of them had only been attending the church for less than a year and were not all that connected. They were excited about the vision of the church and had the kind of character and competence to help us fulfill that vision. I didn't want my announcement to shake them up and cause them to leave the church. So, I hung out with as many potential leaders as possible and told them how much their involvement, especially during a pastoral transition, really mattered.

Over the course of my time at the church, we had attracted lots of marginalized people. They were coming to us in droves. This group included those battling addiction, poverty, and mental diseases. It was impossible for me to spend time with all of the precious people in this group, but it was important for me to hang out with as many as I could. In the mad-dash to pack my office and lead the leaders it would be easy to overlook marginalized people who were seeking refuge and healing in Christ. I tried hard not to let that happen.

Who are the friends, leaders, and marginalized people you will want to hang out with on your way out?

-Finish Out Those Procrastinated Projects

Most outgoing pastors want to have a heroic ending. We want to ride out of town on our white horse with the song Desperado playing in the background. There is a cowgirl or cowboy in most pastoral leaders. God, let's face it, is not nearly as concerned with us finishing heroically as he is with us finishing well. This means completing those less-than-glamorous tasks on the to-do list so that our successor does not have to come and finish out what we left undone.

There were several things I did so that my successor did not have to. Once I announced my resignation, financial giving began to take a dip. I did two things to address this on my way out. I challenged people, I hope with gracious love, to "raise the bar" of their financial support of the church. This was hard for me because I don't particularly enjoy preaching about giving, especially when we were reaching un-churched seekers just about every weekend. Pastors who want to go out like the heroic cowboy on the white horse don't talk about money. But I invited our people to the challenge of giving and appointed a Stewardship Task Force to begin considering ways to enhance financial generosity in our church.

I also addressed a few personnel and policy issues before I finished out my time. One of the biggest favors you can do for the incoming pastor is remove personnel and policy obstacles that are getting in the way of the church's health and mission fulfillment. Again, this won't make you a hero, but your successor and the church will be blessed by your forthright intentionality.

What procrastinated tasks do you need to finish out on your way out?

Conclusion

In my final message as pastor of the church, I shared the following words:

"Most of us know that too many churches are destroyed by the heat of a pastoral transition. The change melts some churches like wax. This tendency causes many of us some concern. But there are other churches that become stronger, more rock-like through the heat of a pastoral change. Time will reveal the true fiber of this church, but I will tell you what I think. You will come through this pastoral transition stronger and more vibrant than ever, because I believe the best

churches are at their best when they are under heat! The impact of my ministry will be most evident in between me and the next lead pastor. If I've done my work in connecting you to God, you will become an even more beautiful bride of Christ during the transition than you already are! If my ministry has really connected you with God, then you will hold onto him for dear life as you go through this change."

The church has exceeded my hopes and dreams for them.

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