

Six Reasons People Leave Your Church

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If you travel the bumpy roads of ministry long enough, some treasured soul will exit your church. Years ago I entered the open road of a new ministry. I pastored a new church. I investigated the potholes, the inclines, and the danger zones of my new path of ministry.

My search drove me into living rooms, into advice on what's best for the church, into the hearts of the members whom I served. Clearly things were not going well. Every curve greeted me with another surprise.

Six Reasons People Leave

1. Poor leadership

When the family announced their departure, I made it a point to visit in their home. I asked them to share their feelings. I requested honesty. "We just don't like the way you're running things."

As a young pastor, my inexperience led to poor decisions.

Financial problems worried the church.

Morale problems infected the church.

A lack of vision created an internal sickness.

Members began to place blame for the troubles.

Since I was their leader, they pointed a finger at me. I had only served the church for six months, but I tried to cure the church with my own diagnosis and prescription. I did not listen to my people. I attempted to solve the dilemmas on my own. The result? Members left the church.

2. Different Style

When church members leave your church, they might travel to another church because they yearn for another style of ministry. They desire a different style of preaching or worship. They hunger for a certain style of music. Their expectations about a church might come from a church, pastor, or program they had in another town.

3. Specific Program

"How did you discover our church?" I asked a woman who quizzed me about the church. "We heard about the church because of the youth program. Some friends told us about your youth ministry."

“Why did you leave our church?” I questioned a former member. “We really like the Music Ministry of our new church,” they responded.

4. Disillusionment

William D. Hendricks talks about a “dark side” to the church. He details numerous stories about people leaving their churches in his book, *Exit Interviews*. He writes, “Despite glowing reports of surging church attendance, more and more Christians in North America are feeling disillusioned with the church and other formal, institutional expressions of Christianity.” (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993, p. 17)

These people remove themselves from the church out of frustration with structure or bureaucracy.

5. Inner Hurts

A close church member invited me to lunch one day. He shocked me when he informed me of his imminent departure from our church. “It’s in the best interest of our family,” he softly spoke. I drove to the church that day disappointed. A year later I received news about the family. The sad news explained the couple’s divorce. Rather than seek help in the church, they fled the church. They retreated to ease the surprise of their impending breakup.

Not every person who leaves the church because of inner hurt leaves on bad terms. Some leave to seek answers to their hurt. Still others take flight to find the acceptance they have missed.

6. Church Size

“I sure have missed you at church,” I said in casual conversation. “Don’t take it personally, but the church has gotten too big for us. We’re used to a smaller church.” Sometimes the church may grow too large. In other cases the church may not be large enough.

How to Handle the Departure

1. Learn From It

By listening, I learn about people. I also learn about myself. Better yet, I learn more about service to God.

A seminary student called his mentor. “I’m ready to quit,” he muttered in tones of despair. “One of our best deacons is leaving the church. He says it’s because of me.” “Son,” the wise mentor replied, “I’ve lost members in every church I’ve pastored. Focus on God’s call. Listen to people and learn from them. Work hard. Love Jesus. Love people. Then remember, you can’t ring everybody’s bell all the time. Trust God and do the best you can in serving the Lord.”

When church members leave your church, learn what you can from it. Learn, then refuse to dwell on it. Too much analysis paralyzes you. As you learn, grow. Then get back to work.

2. Pray For Them

Pray that those people can find a church that feeds them spiritually.

Ask God to provide healing for their hurts.

Request the Lord's guidance as they wander down uncertain trails.

Praying for them nourishes their spiritual life.

It also encourages your attitude toward them, especially if they spoke painful words upon their exit.

3. Open the Gate

When church members leave your church, let them go, bless them as they leave, but leave the gate open for their return.

Eugene Petersen challenges pastors not to become inflated in their self-perception. God works through people. The church moves forward rhythmically like a clock ticking. He writes, "Years ago I noticed, as all pastors must, that when a pastor left a neighboring congregation, the congregational life carried on very well, thank you." (The Contemplative Pastor, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989, p. 25)

As harsh as this sounds, exchange pastor for member and you have a strong truth. Churches carry on. Oh, they miss members who depart. But God has a way of supplying new ones.

The key is to remember, it's the Lord's church. When the back door opens, God often brings twice the number in the front door. When the church is a revolving door, maybe the key to church growth is to have more coming than you do going.