

What Not to Do When People Leave Your Church

We were about to take a great leap of faith. Everyone was excited about the new season. But I sensed something awry among the leadership team.

As I stood before the group, the **Holy Spirit** moved me to warn them that the enemy was looking for opportunities to knock folks out of their positions. I knew in my heart that not all of them would make it.

After the warning I put forth a call for commitment, asking, “Does everyone in this room absolutely know that God has placed you here? Does anyone have any doubt?” Across the board, everyone voiced their agreement that God called them to serve in the local body. Some clearly thought it was strange that I even asked.

A few days later, the **Holy Spirit** showed me some weren’t called to be there. After a few days more, one of them—one who had been the most vocal about his calling to the house—disappeared. He wouldn’t return my calls or text messages and finally told the senior pastor he was leaving. He never spoke to anyone else. He never said goodbye to the people he served with. He just left without a trace, just a week after he vowed God had sent him there to serve.

When I write about topics like **spiritual abuse**, folks invariably email me with their horror stories and ask for advice on whether or not they should leave their church. Lee Grady recently penned a column, “When Is It Time to Leave a Church?” that offers some solid advice. But there’s another side to the church-leaving coin: what *not* to do when people leave your church.

Whether you are in leadership or just a member, it can be

disheartening to see someone leave your local church. But there's a right way and a wrong way to handle these situations. Here are five things not to do when people leave your church.

1. Don't keep your leaders in the dark. This first one is for pastors. When someone leaves, especially someone who had a visible place in ministry, don't keep the reason a secret from your presbytery. Failing to offer any explanation—or just giving a pat answer—for why someone with a position in the church left suddenly can hurt morale. There needs to be a level of honesty and transparency among your core leaders or distrust grows roots. It's not necessary to tell the entire congregation, but your core leaders should pray together about the matter (Acts 15:6).

2. Don't make assumptions. When people leave your church, it can lead to a lot of assumption and presumption among the congregation. These are dangerous waters. If leadership doesn't offer an explanation about why a person with a visible position in the ministry left (some things are best kept private), you have two choices: You can ask the person yourself or you can let it go. But don't sit with your friends and try to figure out why someone left. That typically leads to presumption, and the Bible doesn't have much good to say about presumption. Remember what the Preacher said: "In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise" (Prov. 10:19).

3. Don't spread rumors. I wrote more about this in my column, "Why Spread Rumors About People Who Leave Your Church?" Assumptions can lead to gossip and gossip fuels rumors. If someone comes to you with gossip and rumors, tell them you don't want to hear it. Bring correction in love. Exodus 23:1 says, "You shall not circulate a false report. Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness." Even if you know the rumor is true, you should direct your energy to prayer, not gossip. Paul wrote, "Let no corrupt word proceed

out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers" (Eph. 4:29). One way to get someone to stop gossiping is to immediately suggest praying for the one who left. Usually, that ends the conversation.

4. Don't paint them as the enemy. Some churches position exiting members as enemies. (Some actually curse them on their way out the door.) And some even make it clear that you are no longer allowed to associate with the one who left. This is not the love of God. We are all members of the kingdom of God. If someone leaves trying to drag other members out the door with them, it's understandable why the leadership and the congregation would be cautious. That's wisdom. But we still have to walk in love, and that includes our words. We are to bless and not curse (see Rom. 12:14).

5. Don't burn bridges. When someone leaves your church, that doesn't necessarily mean the relationship has to end. You never know what synergies remain between you or what the next season will bring. I've only attended a handful of churches in my Christian lifetime, and I still have good relations with all of them, save the one where spiritual abuse reigns. And I am praying for them all the more. Remember, it's about the kingdom.

Sometimes, it's better that people leave your church. Remember, before the incident where the sold-out ministry leader left, the **Holy Spirit** showed me not all would make it. He also showed me some people in the congregation needed to leave. People who flow in wrong spirits and won't repent, people who are practicing sin and won't give it up, people who consistently breed strife and division ... these are like weeds in your church plant. If they won't repent, it's usually better that they leave because a little leaven leavens the whole lump. Jezebel rips churches apart. Sin can spread like wildfire. But you still shouldn't make assumptions, spread rumors about them, paint them as an enemy or burn bridges when

they do leave. I assure you that you can walk in wisdom and walk in love at the same time. Amen.

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