

by Wade Hodges

WHEN TO LEAVE



HOW TO KNOW
**IT'S TIME
TO MOVE ON**
(BEFORE YOU STAY WAY TOO LONG)

Introduction: Where is That Easy Button?

“There is always an easy solution to every problem--neat, plausible, and wrong.”

—H. L. Mencken

Moses had it easy. A cloud by day; fire by night. He always knew where he was supposed to be—when to stay put and when to leave. Follow the fire; stay close to the cloud. Easy. (As long as Israel stayed out of the calf-building business and he kept his temper in check.)

Jonah had it easy. God told him where to go and what to say. When he tried to run the other way God made him a whale of an offer he couldn't refuse. Spit him out exactly where God wanted him. He may not have been thrilled by it, but God's will for Jonah's life was easily discerned.

Paul had it easy too. He tried to go somewhere he didn't belong and God blocked his way. God left no room for doubt. Go here, not there. Later, Paul learned it was time to move on when he saw a vision of a man pleading for some help in Macedonia. He left without a second thought. So, so easy. (Except for the part about how he was arrested and severely beaten once he got there.)

I bet you're wishing God would make it just as easy for you as you struggle with a possible transition to a new church or job (minus the wilderness wanderings, whale puke, and public flogging).

Sorry, but it's probably not going to happen.

If you're thinking about turning down an attractive but risky opportunity with another church, don't expect to see a smoke signal in the sky telling you to move your family across the country.

If you're about to cut and run from a difficult ministry, a land shark isn't going to show up at your door and swallow you to keep you from leaving too soon.

If you're afraid of making a mistake and taking a job that could kill your career, don't count on God setting up a road block that will re-route you to a safer destination.

Stop looking for the easy button.

There ain't one.

And even if there were, you wouldn't want to push it. Not for something this important.

In Search of a Goldilocks Moment

“As fate would have it, Jay's status appears to be at an all-time high, perfect time to say goodbye.”

—Jay Z

Every pastor leaves.

Some are fired, some retire, and some are “refired” (forced to retire). Some die of old age mid-sermon, some sneak out of town in the middle of the night, some breathe a sigh of relief as they clean out their office, and some tearfully announce their decision to accept a call from another church. One way or another, they all leave, and so will you.

The only question is *when*.

Which would you prefer: staying too long or leaving too soon?

I'll take the position that it's better to stay too long. When you leave too soon, especially amidst difficult circumstances, you miss the opportunity to learn lessons that only hardship, resistance, and disappointment can teach. Conventional wisdom says the longer a pastor stays at a church the more fruitful his ministry will be. What conventional wisdom fails to mention is that not all churches are created equal. Some situations are worse than others. Stay in a bad situation *way* too long and your faith may die on the vine.

In summary: leaving too early is bad, staying too long is better, but staying *way* too long is the worst.

That's why knowing when to leave can be harder than figuring out where to go.

If only there were a way of discerning the perfect time to say goodbye, so that when you do decide to leave you know you're standing squarely in the sweet spot of not bailing out too soon or overstaying your welcome.

Let's call it a Goldilocks moment—the “just right” time to leave.

Yes, such moments exist. But they are as elusive as a unicorn on roller skates.

And usually only recognizable in hindsight.

And usually more the result of luck than insight.

How many people do you know who can say they left their last job, sold their stock, or put their house on the market at precisely the right moment?

Can they honestly attribute their perfect timing to anything else but good fortune (or insider information obtained illegally)?

The premise of this book is that the best way to know when it's time to leave is when it starts to feel like you've stayed too long. Otherwise, you may spend the rest of your life wondering if you gave up too soon.

Why do so many great professional athletes play one season too many and retire only after it's become painfully obvious that they no longer belong on the court or field anymore? Why do some try to make a comeback (usually ill-advised) after retiring? *Because they'd rather embarrass themselves by staying too long than live with the regret of leaving too soon.*

The only sure-fire way to keep from being haunted by the specter of having left too soon is to make sure you stay too long. Just don't stay so long that you fry your system and disqualify yourself from future opportunities. The goal is to stay *long enough* without staying *way too long*.

To that end, I'm going to issue a couple of dire warnings about staying *way too long*, and then suggest some ways to recognize when you've stayed *long enough*. If some of them resonate, then it may be time to move on. If you think of an important issue I've overlooked that could be included in future editions, email me at wadehodes@gmail.com.

(If you find a typo, let me know and I'll fix it with much gratitude in my heart for you and your kin.)

I can't guarantee that reading this book will give you clarity, but I can guarantee it will be a more productive exercise than trying to hunt down Goldilocks, who was last seen pushing an easy button while riding on the back of a roller-skating unicorn.

The Dark Side: Why You Can't Afford to Stay Way Too Long

"The world ain't all sunshine and rainbows. It's a very mean and nasty place and I don't care how tough you are it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it. You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain't about how hard ya hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward. How much you can take and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done!"

—Rocky Balboa

Boxers need someone else to stop the fight on their behalf. They've been trained to fight to the bell, to keep swinging as long as they're still standing, to not give up until someone gets knocked out.

Pastors can be a lot like boxers. You've been trained to expect difficulty in ministry. You expect opposition to every worthwhile initiative you promote. You've read the gospels and enough church history to know that religious people can do awful things in the name of God. You understand the implications of following a crucified Lord who embraced suffering as a means to redemption.

So when you step into the ring and stand toe-to-toe with a church that tends to direct its collective anxiety, anger, and disappointment toward their minister, you expect to take a few punches. It's part of the job. What you don't expect is for your opponents to be wearing gloves laced with plaster. Nor do you expect them to land so many head shots.

- They overwhelm you with unrealistic expectations.
- They hold you accountable for things you have no authority to change.
- After highlighting your every mistake, they break out the list of problems they have with your family.
- They question your integrity and assume the worst about your motives.

- They send you hateful, anonymous emails that hit your inbox at 10pm so you see them before heading to bed.
- They ambush you in what's supposed to be a routine meeting.
- They invite you to lunch to tell you that you're not good enough to get the job done.
- They pour gasoline on rumors and fan the flame of gossip.
- They put sugar in your gas tank.

Because you're faithful, because you're arrogant, because you follow a crucified Lord, because you don't know any better, or because no one will throw in the towel on your behalf, you keep taking punches.

You stagger, you sway, you bleed, but you keep standing.

Just like a boxer who takes too many head shots, you sustain permanent damage.

Not to your brain, but to your soul. The long-term effects of soul damage can be devastating.

- You stop dreaming.
- You stop hoping.
- You stop praying.
- You lose confidence in God.
- You lose confidence in yourself.
- You give up.

- You stop following Jesus.
- You stop loving your enemies.
- You stop trusting others.
- You give in to fear.
- You start hating.
- You radiate anger.
- You become obsessed with revenge.
- You do to others before they can do the same to you.
- You rationalize your use of food, sex, or drugs to cope.
- You justify your affair by deciding that God owes you one dalliance as compensation for what you've suffered.
- You lose it all.
- Your family moves on without you.
- You wake up one morning wondering how you became the kind of person you despise.
- You wonder if God still loves you.
- You start looking for a way back.
- You spend the rest of your days pondering what might have been.

This isn't a game. It isn't an academic exercise. It ceased being a philosophical discussion three minutes ago.

This is your life, your family, your calling, and your faith.

Your soul can take only so many punches.

If you were a boxer, would the people in your corner be shouting at the referee to stop the fight?

How to Stay Way Too Long: A Bit of My Story

“One of the symptoms of an approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one’s work is terribly important.”

—Bertrand Russell

Once upon a time there was a pastor who moved to a small church when he was 25 years old and stayed there for forty years until he retired. No, this isn’t the beginning of a pastoral fairy tale. I can think of several pastors, like Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, and Bob Russell, who have served only one church throughout their distinguished careers. Warren and Hybels started the churches they currently serve. Russell moved to his church as a young preacher and during his forty year tenure helped it grow from 120 members into one of the largest churches in America.

I admire those guys.

For the longest time, I aspired to be one of them.

When I signed on to work with my first church at the tender age of 23, I had Bob Russell in mind as I dreamed of helping a struggling church of 75 people become one of the largest churches in the world during my forty year career.

Six years later I still had Russell in mind when I accepted a call to work with a church of 750 in need of a “turnaround.” Her glory days were well in the rear-view mirror, but there were reasons to believe in a hopeful future. I moved there at the still naive age of 30 and figured I had the next 35 years to make a name for myself.

Six years later, at the seasoned age of 36, I had Warren and Hybels in mind when I embarked on an adventure to plant a church I could pastor for the next thirty years.

Now at age 38, I write books and counsel pastors on how to have a more realistic appraisal of their gifts and vision for ministry.

I stayed at both of the existing churches longer than I should have. Maybe a couple of years too long in both cases.

(The church planting adventure lasted only 18 months. This was plenty of time for me to figure out that I was not called to be a church planter, even though it was something I had always wanted to try. A church plant will sort you out faster than an established church will, but that's another story for another day. For symbolic reasons, all of my comments about my church planting experience will be parenthetical.)

As I was staying too long at both churches, I would have told you that I was trying to be faithful. Faithful to God, to the church, to my conviction that one shouldn't run away from a difficult ministry assignment, and faithful to good ole conventional wisdom.

One of my guiding principles was a proverb I picked up from one of my favorite college professors: *A lot of hard work is wasted for lack of a little more.*

I couldn't stomach the possibility of quitting only a couple of months before a major breakthrough. It would be like bailing out of a marathon at the 25 mile marker. One reason I stayed *way too long* was because I didn't want to waste a lot of hard work for lack of a little more.

I was also fearful that whoever followed me would step in, take advantage of all the hard work I had done, and be wildly successful. This was a terrible, immature attitude, and it got me forever barred from the John-the-Baptist-Prepare-the-Way-for-Someone-Else-Club, but I didn't want another minister enjoying the fruit of my labor because I quit too soon.

Faithfulness can be a great disguise for darker motives.

That's why one of the easiest ways to stay *way too long* is to confuse faithfulness with arrogance. After a few years in both churches, it was obvious that what each church needed from its pastor was not what I

did best. Instead of admitting that I was ill-equipped to provide these churches with the kind of leadership and pastoral touch they needed, I persisted.

I stayed *way too long* at my second church because I refused to believe that I couldn't get the job done. More than just believing I was the best man for the job, I was convinced I was the ONLY man for the job. If I couldn't make it work, no one else could either. So I stayed longer than necessary because I was arrogant and thought more highly of myself than I should have.

During a particularly difficult time, when the church was seized with more conflict and plagued by lower morale than usual, one of my mentors asked me if I was thinking about leaving. I told him I didn't think I could because I wasn't sure the church would survive if I left. He gently reminded me that unless I had learned to walk on water I was overestimating my value to the church. He was also kind enough to refrain from suggesting that the opposite might be more accurate--the church's health might immediately improve if I were to leave.

I don't know exactly how or when it happened, but in the midst of a difficult situation, I started taking myself too seriously, thinking I was more capable and more important than I really was. When I finally left, I was suspicious of others, lacking confidence in myself, and cynical about the way churches worked. (Not the best emotional base from which to try to plant a church.)

Those sympathetic to my plight might be tempted to praise me for my faithfulness in tough circumstances or blame the church for mistreating a young minister. The truth is, it was my arrogance that led me to remain in an emotionally destructive and faith draining environment far longer than necessary.

To quote William H. Bonney in *Young Guns 2*, "Yessir, I have my scars."

And most of my wounds have been self-inflicted.

If you can't imagine leaving your current church because you don't

think it will survive without you, there are two possibilities to consider, and neither one of them is any good.

1. You're right. If so, you've led in such a way to make the church totally dependent on your energy, gifts, and personality. If you've managed to make yourself more important to the church than Jesus, then you've got some explaining to do. We'll talk more about this later.

2. You're wrong. Which means your arrogance is clouding your perception of what's really going on around you. This makes you a danger to yourself and to others. You need to get some distance from the situation to refresh your perspective. You also need to be reminded that you are not that important. Both would be accomplished by stepping away for a sabbatical or moving on and then watching the church do just fine, if not better, without you.

As Close To An Easy Button as You're Going to Get

"Should I stay or should I go now?
If I go there will be trouble
An' if I stay it will be double
So come on and let me know!
Should I stay or should I go?"
—The Clash

Let's get a couple of the more obvious indicators that it's time to leave out of the way.

Are your opponents trying to kill you?

For Paul it was simple: either God told him where to go in a vision or the people who heard him preach started throwing rocks at him.

You gotta hand it to troublemakers in the good ole days. They knew how to run a preacher out of town. They didn't waste time with clandestine committee meetings or whispering campaigns. If they didn't like your message or your ministry, they tried to kill you.

If you start getting stoned, it's time to move on.

I stand by this assertion no matter how you choose to interpret that last sentence.

Here's another easy one:

Have you just been fired? Then it's okay to move on. No seriously, if you get fired, you should leave.

In one of the more surreal moments of my career, I was involved in the termination of a staff member who didn't understand that being fired meant we no longer wanted him to continue doing his job. He

kept volunteering to do his old job for free and we kept telling him he was fired. It was like being trapped in a Seinfeld episode.

If you are fired by your church, resist the temptation to hang around the church while you figure out your next move. I've seen ministers who have been let go by their church try to stick around and act like nothing happened while they looked for a new job with another church, or as they transitioned out of professional ministry.

Awkward.

Especially for the new pastor who follows you.

Especially if some people don't like the new pastor and keep asking you what you think about him.

Especially if you're bitter about being fired and can't resist pointing out how you would do things differently if you had your old job back.

Nothing good can come of this.

Why would you want to stick around anyway? They just fired you!

They may have told you it wasn't personal, just business, but you should take it personally anyway and get a fresh start at a new church, whether you remain in professional ministry or pursue a new vocation.

I'm thinking of exceptions to this rule even as I type this, but that's okay. I can think of an exception to just about everything I say in this book.

What Does Your Discernment Community Say?

"If you're dumb, surround yourself with smart people. If you're smart, surround yourself with smart people who disagree with you."

—Aaron Sorkin

What comes next is idealistic, unrealistic, naive, crazy talk. You probably won't have the guts to implement what I'm about to describe.

Tragic.

But I understand why you won't.

It could get you fired.

One autumn evening I called a meeting with the elders. I also invited our associate minister who was a trusted friend. We met at the home of one of the elders and sat in a circle on the back porch.

I spent the first few minutes summarizing the major events of my ministry there and being honest about my frustrations. I told them I was seriously considering other ministry opportunities.

Then I asked them, "Do you guys think it's time for me to move on to something else?"

This is a dangerous question to ask an elder board. We've all heard the horror stories.

A pastor entertains a conversation with another church about an open position. Somehow the elders hear that he is visiting with another church and they call an emergency meeting to fire him. Sad and pathetic, but all too common.

You may be at a church where if you even hinted to your elders that you were thinking about leaving they would expedite the process for

you, but that wasn't my situation.

When I asked my elders if they thought it was time for me to leave, I wasn't worried about being fired on the spot. I didn't call the meeting to warn them or negotiate for a raise. I wanted them to help me discern what God might be wanting for me and my family. I valued their input and needed their wisdom. I trusted them to tell me the truth. I didn't trust myself to make such an important decision in isolation.

I've never been involved in a discernment conversation that was crisp, clean, and certain. Most are a messy mix of meandering questions, crooked trails, and loose ends. This meeting was no different. After I posed the question, we went around the circle and everyone asked me a few questions and gave their opinions. We talked the sun down behind the horizon and kept the palaver going until the evening chill forced us inside.

I can't remember everything that was said, but I remember leaving the meeting knowing that it was time to move on. Not so much because the group told me it was time to go, but because no one had said I definitely needed to stay. The questions they asked and the way they asked them helped me see that I had stayed too long.

I chose to include my elders and a co-worker in the discernment process. That made sense for me. We trusted each other. That may not be the right move for you. I would, however, encourage you to invite a small group of trusted people to join you in discerning what to do. Don't ask them to make the decision for you. Let them ask you tough questions and do your best to give them honest answers. Ask their opinion about what they see and listen to what they have to say. Also, pay close attention to what they choose *not* to say. They can help you make sure you're not taking the easy way out or getting ready to run at the first sign of trouble.

Here's a proposal: I'd like to see more pastors include their elder board in the discernment process when they're interviewing with another church. (Cue gasp!)

Wouldn't it be great if every ministry transition were governed by what is best for the Kingdom instead of by a spirit of competition or selfishness from church leaders who don't want to lose their pastor to another church?

Super-duper crazy talk alert: What if, when a pastor was considering moving to a new church, he invited leaders from both churches to interact with each other as a way of discerning where God wants him to serve for the next few years? This seems so much better than clandestine conversations with search teams at out of the way Mexican restaurants. What an amazing vision it would require for the leadership teams of two churches to come together and discern which church the pastor should serve for the good of the Kingdom. Okay, enough unreasonable craziness.

Do yourself a huge favor and include a group of people you trust in the discernment process. If you pick the right people, people who love you and want what is best for you, even if it isn't what's best for them, you'll improve your chances of making a good decision.

Do Your Disciples Need to Grow Up?

But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

—John 16:7 (NIV)

Jesus left.

His followers didn't want him to go. They had just gotten him back from the dead. They wanted to cling to him, to hold on and enjoy the new reality of the resurrection with him. He left anyway.

Why would he do that?

The Sunday School answer is that he left so the Holy Spirit could come and equip the disciples for their mission into the world (John 16:7-11). Okay. But why was it necessary for Jesus to leave before the Holy Spirit could come? Could they not be in the same place at the same time? Grab some coffee and a doughnut and we'll sit in a circle and tie ourselves in a metaphysical knot until the bell rings.

If we press deeper, we see that Jesus' mission wasn't complete until his exaltation as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Once he ascended to the heavens, he filled the universe with his glory by pouring out the Holy Spirit on his people so they could grow to maturity and manifest his ongoing presence in the world by exercising their spiritual gifts (Eph. 4: 7-16). Sounds good to me, even if I still don't fully understand why it was a theological necessity.

Maybe the best thing to do with this question is to stay out of the deep end of the pool and focus on the practical intent of what Jesus says in John 16:7, "It is for your good that I am going away."

What if Jesus had stayed? Have you ever thought about how his physical presence would have complicated an already complex world?

Where would he have set up his headquarters? Jerusalem is a safe bet.

If you had been an early follower of the resurrected Jesus, how would his physical presence in the world have impacted your ministry? Would you have been more or less likely to leave Jerusalem if Jesus lived there?

As it was, it took an outbreak of persecution to scatter the early disciples into the world after Pentecost (Acts 8:1). Their inclination was to stay huddled in Jerusalem where they could enjoy this new thing God was doing among them. How much more so if Jesus had used Jerusalem as his home base?

What kind of disciples would have been formed if Jesus had stayed? Would they have been able to think for themselves or would they run to Jesus for an answer to every question and a solution to every problem? Would they be able to handle hardship on their own or would they expect Jesus to come running every time they stubbed their toe? The resurrected Jesus would have been the world's largest easy button and people from all over the world would have flocked to Jerusalem to push it. The traffic would have been terrible.

By leaving, Jesus empowers his disciples to grow up. They'll still have access to him through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, but he will be less tangible. In times of trouble, they'll rely on Jesus by relying on the Holy Spirit and each other. The way forward will be less certain. They'll be forced to solve problems on their own without always getting a definitive word from Jesus. They'll still have their doubts, and they'll continue to misunderstand what God wants to do in the world. They'll struggle to get along with one another. If they want to see the risen Jesus, they'll have to learn to see him in each other's eyes.

Jesus strengthened his disciples by leaving.

Do you see where this is going?

It's dangerous to compare our ministry to Jesus'. Most of us don't need any more nudges in the direction of a messiah complex. But there is a

lesson to be learned here, so let's venture a few more steps down this spooky corridor before we turn around and run away.

Just like Jesus, pastors inspire mixed reactions from the crowds who hear them teach. Some people set themselves against you and make your life miserable. Others adore you and put you on a pedestal.

To your adoring fans, whether you like it or not, YOU are the mediated presence of Jesus in their midst. They follow you as you follow Christ. They would never say it out loud, but functionally, this is what they're doing.

They take their cues from you. You're teaching them how to read the Bible, pray, talk about God, and reach out to others. If you are frustrated because most people in your congregation aren't doing many of these things on their own, it's because they are choosing to live their spiritual lives vicariously through your efforts.

The more your church grows and the more successful your ministry appears to be, the more people there will be who rely on you in this way. Go ahead and assume that the majority of those who have come to your church during your tenure are following Jesus through you, especially if they have become Christians because of the way you've articulated and modeled the gospel for them.

So here is the problem: You initially played a helpful role in drawing people closer to Christ, but you eventually became an obstacle to their further development. You're keeping them from growing because they were meant to follow Christ, not you. They love you so much they don't realize that you are holding them back.

If you stay *way too long*, then you will actually cripple your church because they won't know what to do without you when you finally do leave, die, or mess up and get fired. The more magnetic your personality and charismatic your leadership style, the more true this will prove to be.

So at some point you have to ask: Am I actually doing a disservice to

the church by staying? Am I hindering people from developing a faith of their own? Have I become their easy button that keeps them from taking risks, confronting their doubts, and solving their own problems?

The more likely you are to entertain a messiah complex and believe that you're God's gift to the church, the more essential it is to imitate the actual Messiah who understood that the best way to facilitate growth in his followers was to leave.

Pay attention to what your fans say to you. If too many of them tell you they don't know what they would do without you, it may be time to put them in a position to figure it out.

Now don't go renting a moving van just yet. Jesus didn't abandon his disciples, he left them in good hands.

For more information about how to execute a healthy succession plan, check out Bob Russell's book [*Transition Plan*](#).

Have You Lost the Support of the Cronkite in Your Congregation?

“And that’s the way it is.”
—Walter Cronkite

In 1968, Walter Cronkite returned from Vietnam and expressed his doubts about the United States’ chances of success in the conflict there. When President Johnson heard of Cronkite’s dissent, he reportedly said, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America.”

Johnson knew that if he lost the support of one of America’s most trusted voices it would be impossible to maintain or regain the support of the American people.

Every church has its own version of Walter Cronkite. Someone who is admired and trusted by the majority of the congregation. It may be the ex-elder who always has his pockets full of candy for the kids. Or the quiet yet strong gray-haired lady who has never taught a Bible class in her life, but raised five great kids while putting up with a grumpy husband. Or the middle-aged couple who buried a child ten years ago and won the respect of the congregation for the way they maintained their faith in the face of unspeakable pain.

When church members are unsure, confused, or upset by an upcoming change announced on a Sunday morning they will look to the Cronkite for assurance. If the Cronkite is supportive of the change, or at least appears unperturbed by the announcement, it will diffuse much of the anxiety in everyone else. If the Cronkite denounces the change or appears to be upset about it in any way, the rest of the church will be less likely to embrace the change as well. Bonus leadership insight: Never announce a change without first knowing you have the support of the Cronkite(s) in your church.

The same people who want to know how the Cronkite feels about a specific change will also want to know what he or she thinks about the job you’re doing as the pastor. As long as the Cronkite vocally supports you, you’ve got some leadership credibility left in your account. If you

ever lose the support of the Cronkite(s) in your church, you've stayed too long.

In my second church, there was an older man who functioned as the church's Cronkite. He wasn't an elder. He avoided all public forms of leadership. Because of the way he had lived his life, he held the respect of nearly everyone in the church. He was a wonderful man and I enjoyed a great relationship with him for the first five and a half years of my ministry there. While many others questioned my leadership or voiced their disapproval of the direction the church was heading, he remained steadfastly in my corner. As long as he was in the background giving me a "thumbs up" I knew I was doing okay.

When several members of his immediate family decided to leave our church, I got a call from him during which he lovingly, but honestly told me he was losing faith in my leadership. When I hung up, I knew I had lost Cronkite.

He wasn't the kind of man who would campaign for my job or publicly oppose my leadership, but it would only be a matter of time before his lack of confidence in me leaked out to others in the church.

It was time to leave.

Has the Church Lost Your Trust?

"A person who trusts no one can't be trusted."

—Jerome Blattner

I didn't ask if you had lost the trust of your church. If you completely lose the trust of those to whom you are ministering, you won't have to worry about figuring out when to leave, they'll take care of that for you.

Just because you haven't been fired doesn't mean that everyone in your church trusts you. Don't worry. This is natural, and even healthy. When everyone trusts you, you're only a few months away from being a feature story on 60 Minutes.

Having others trust you is nice, but it's not a prerequisite for doing ministry.

I remember sitting in an elders' meeting during my first year at a new church. I had just made a proposal and it was being opposed by one of the elders. When I asked him to explain his objection, he said, "You're a minister and I don't trust ministers."

His distrust had nothing to do with me. He barely even knew me. His distrust of ministers was a result of his being a long-time elder in a toxic system in which the relationship between the preacher and the elders was always antagonistic. He was a Hatfield and I was a McCoy. That's the way things worked in that church.

I was hurt that he didn't trust me, but it didn't keep me from doing my job. Yes, it limited my effectiveness, but I still had the opportunity to earn his trust over time by doing my job well and with integrity.

You can do ministry without having the trust of others, but you can't do ministry without trusting others.

One of the signs you've stayed too long is when you find yourself not

trusting the elders or other key leaders in the church. To be an effective minister you have to entrust yourself to the people you're serving, even though you know some will let you down or betray you. When you are no longer able to give others the same kind of trust you'd like them to give you, you're entering the danger zone.

If you are overwhelmed with suspicion and unable to trust your partners in ministry, then it may be time to leave.

If you have been wounded so badly that you're going to have a hard time trusting others in your next church, it may be time to take an extended break from full-time ministry.

Some pastors disqualify themselves from ministry because of moral failure.

Some are disqualified by a failure of trust, which is to say they are no longer capable of trusting others.

Can You Hire Someone Without Lying?

“If a man smiles all the time, he’s probably selling something that doesn’t work.”

—George Carlin

One of my final acts of leadership at my last church was to oversee a prolonged search for a new youth minister.

I was the leader of the search team and primary recruiter of candidates. Almost every student minister I contacted about the job asked the most annoying question: How committed are you to staying long-term?

Such a good question to ask your future boss. I always fumbled the answer because I kept tripping over the truth. Which was that I didn’t know how long I was willing to stay. I told them I wasn’t exploring any other options, but that I couldn’t promise I wouldn’t pursue opportunities in the near future.

Here’s what they heard me saying, “You really should come work here. You’ll like it. By the way, I’m going to jump on the first life boat that comes floating by.”

Our search process didn’t go well.

My inability to say, “I love this church and trust me, I’m not going anywhere,” kept us from moving forward with several promising candidates.

It also got me to thinking about my future with the church.

Why couldn’t I get excited about inviting someone to join our team?

For starters, we were immersed in perpetual conflict, functioning without an operating ministry budget, and worn out from repeatedly pushing Sisyphus’s rock up the hill only to have it come crashing back

down on us. I was burned out and unable to sell the church to a potential staff member because I was no longer buying it myself.

I didn't really notice this until the candidates started asking me about my future intentions. Until I had to verbalize it to another human being, I didn't realize I was unable to proclaim my undying loyalty to the church.

If you can't joyfully and energetically recruit someone to your team, you've probably stayed too long.

If not, then at the very least, it means you shouldn't be in charge of the search process.

Do You Need To Learn To Dream Again?

"When you wish upon a falling star, your dreams can come true. Unless it's really a meteorite hurtling to the Earth which will destroy all life. Then you're pretty much hosed no matter what you wish for. Unless it's death by meteor."
—www.despair.com

Several years ago there was a popular little book among pastors called "To Dream Again." It was about how aging churches lose their ability to dream of a better future.

Churches begin with an energizing vision to bring a particular manifestation of Christian community into existence. People gather around this dream and are inspired to take risks, make sacrifices, and do whatever is necessary to make it a reality.

Over time, the church loses touch with its originating passion. The world moves on, the church stops dreaming, then plateaus, declines, and eventually dies.

The book described a process that church leaders could use to help a plateaued or declining congregation recover its capacity to dream again. It was a good book with nice diagrams.

Many pastors who tried to implement the plan suggested in the book discovered just how hard it can be to reverse the trajectory of a declining church. The biggest danger for pastors attempting such a turnaround is that they can be sucked in and pulled down by the negative momentum they are trying to overcome.

In *Switch: How To Change Things When Change is Hard*, the authors highlight the massive influence our peer group has on our behavior. (huge surprise right?) Example: if you are overweight and start hanging out with skinny people your chances of losing weight increase. If you're skinny and start spending most of your time with overweight friends or co-workers you will probably start gaining weight. Weight gain or loss is certainly more complex than this example implies, but

how many diets have been abandoned over lunch with a few friends?

In a similar way, if you are an idealistic, big-dreaming, make-it-happen kind of person and you move to a church full of broken-down, beaten-up, and cynical people who haven't dreamed an inspiring dream or seen a compelling vision in years, you are swimming upstream with a fifty pound anchor tied to your leg.

Instead of asking "Can you imagine what would happen if we tried this? Wouldn't it be cool if we did that?" you could instead find yourself saying "We've tried that before and it didn't work. Why bother? It probably won't make a difference anyway. Whatever. It doesn't matter."

If you sense you're losing your ability to dream, and if you can no longer summon the necessary energy to take bold and risky action that could lead to something wonderful, then you may have stayed too long.

God still does amazing things in the world. God is still full of surprises. God still raises the dead. God still changes lives. If you are surrounded by people who no longer believe that "with God anything is possible" and if you are starting to doubt it yourself, then you've stayed *long enough*.

A little girl crawled into her parents' bed and said, "I came in here because there aren't any good dreams in my room."

Sometimes you've got to go where the good dreams are.

Does the Work Still Require the Best of You?

"All I've ever wanted was an honest week's pay for an honest day's work."

—Steve Martin

Church members--especially those who operate heavy machinery--love to joke about how pastors only have to work one day a week. It's not true, of course, but since it's only us ministers reading this, let's acknowledge that it's not completely false either.

In many churches, if the pastor can stay out of trouble and resist making trouble for others, he can enjoy an amazingly flexible schedule as long as he preaches decent sermons, buries the dead, visits the sick, and shows up at the majority of social functions. Once he figures out how to do the bare minimum to keep his church happy and his paycheck coming, he can start coasting between Sundays, because he doesn't have to give his best in order to keep his job.

This is a dangerous place to be, especially if you recognize that "he" is actually "you."

If so, then you already know that fulfilling your job description well enough to keep from getting fired isn't the same as continually pushing yourself to grow and develop as a follower of Jesus, a leader of others, and an oxygen-consuming citizen of planet earth.

I know you didn't pursue your calling years ago with the goal that someday you'd be able to game the system and get away with being acceptably mediocre. It just sort of happened.

Repeated disappointment drained your energy. Constant criticism sapped your passion for changing the world. You grew weary of feeling like you were the only one trying to get the church unstuck from a ditch while the world moved on without you.

One day, because you were hurting or depressed or tired, you held back your best. You spent a little less time on sermon preparation. You

never got around to sending a note to the family who visited for the first time the week before. You remained silent in a board meeting when you had something important to say. You started going along to get along. You stopped pursuing excellence. You gave into the relentless resistance of the status quo. You started coasting.

And then something terrible happened.

No one seemed to notice.

Even worse, even those who noticed didn't care.

Every week it got just a little bit easier to give less than your best, until it became a habit.

When I was just starting out as a minister, I would interact with older ministers who were obviously mailing it in. They weren't studying, learning, or growing. They did just enough and no more. I vowed that I would never end up like them.

Just a few years later I found myself in a discouraging situation in which it became way too easy to flip the switch to auto-pilot. I started to coast. So I resigned and tried to start a church from scratch. (It turned out to be a misguided adventure, but the impulse behind it was aimed in the right direction.)

Life is too short to stay in one place so long that it becomes acceptable to give less than your best.

Are You Bored?

“Doing nothing is very hard to do... you never know when you’re finished.”

—Leslie Nielsen

Some churches are complex and complicated. There are always strange people to meet, suspicious questions to answer, thorny problems to solve, treacherous political currents to navigate, and explosive conflicts to manage. You have to be at your best every time you walk into the office, answer the phone, check your email, or open the budget spreadsheet, because you never know what might be waiting for you. These kinds of churches keep you on your toes. I know. I worked with one for six years. It wasn’t much fun, but I was rarely bored.

Some churches are simple, and not in a streamlined, structural sort of way. I mean simple as in uneventful, quiet, and predictable. These churches go years without a major controversy, months without having an elders meeting, weeks without having a new person visit on a Sunday morning, and days without having someone drop by the office for an unexpected visit. Simple churches afford the pastor plenty of free time and very few sleepless nights. These kinds of churches can drive you mad with boredom. I know. I worked with one for six years.

It was my first church out of seminary and the first three years were great. My rookie mistakes and naive idealism were enough to keep me from getting bored. In the fourth year, something shifted within me and I no longer found the work challenging. I tried to generate some energy in the church and in myself, but the mud was deep and the truck was stuck.

I had stayed long enough to get bored and it was time to move on. Instead, for reasons I’ve already mentioned, I stayed another couple of years. It wasn’t good for me or the church. I sought out other projects and business ventures to stay occupied. I almost left professional ministry to become a land developer.

I finally left for a more complicated church in search of more action and bigger challenges.

Leaving your current church is not the only way to overcome boredom, but in some instances it's not only beneficial, but necessary to keep you from doing something stupid.

If you stay bored long enough, you could end up sabotaging your ministry. How many pastors have disqualified themselves with a moral failure that originated from a deep sense of boredom?

How many pastors have hurt their churches by pushing an unwise and unnecessary agenda because they couldn't stand the boredom any longer and decided it was time to blow something up?

Idle hands are the devil's workshop.

Don't let yourself stay bored too long.

Are You Tired of Having to be Excellent All the Time?

“The downside of being better than everyone else is that people tend to assume you’re pretentious.”

—Dr. E. L. Kersten

I have a couple of friends who are great preachers. Their sermons are theologically rich without being dull. Their jokes are funny without being indulgent. They practice what they preach. Most discouraging of all, they make it look easy.

But it’s not.

Preaching great sermons week after week is hard work. No matter how good your last sermon was, there’s always another Sunday coming.

The expectation to be great, both from themselves and from their churches, is grinding them into a fine powder one sermon at a time.

Excellence can be exhausting and productivity can keep you from tending your flock.

It’s easy to start thinking of ministry as a collection of well-organized “to do” lists and project management flow charts. This can be exciting and engaging for awhile, but then the busyness of church business begins to wear you down. You’re moving fast and getting a lot of things done, but there is a growing distance between you and the people you’re supposed to be serving.

I’m not a people person. I’m a dyed-in-the-wool introvert who didn’t get into ministry to hold hands and hug necks, but instead to preach sermons and teach Scripture. Yet even I see the absurdity in confusing project lists and “next action” items with pastoral ministry.

If the pressure to be productively excellent while being excellently productive has worn you down, a move to a slower, simpler, less demanding church system may be just what your soul needs.

I was visiting with a pastor's son who watched his dad fry his adrenal glands leading a large church in a big city. His dad stayed *way too long* at a church that built its ministry strategy on his excellence and it nearly killed him.

The son told me how his dad was now serving a small church in a hidden corner of the Pacific Northwest. The pace is much slower and the system is less complicated. He said his dad couldn't be happier. He's not under constant pressure to leap from the pinnacle of the temple at the end of every sermon. His ministry is no longer judged by how much stuff he gets done, but by how much time he spends with his flock.

He's learning to love people almost as much as he once loved checking to-do items off his list.

His new church still requires his "best." But now his best is defined more by his presence than his production.

He had to leave his old church to learn how to be present at his new one.

Maybe you do too.

Does Your Family Hate the Church?

“Do you want to be married to the church or to your wife?”

—Charles Siburt

“Hate” is a strong word, but it’s appropriate in this situation. Ministry families can come to hate the church because of what they see it doing to the one they love. One of the most important signs you’ve stayed too long is that your ministry is beginning to adversely impact the faith and attitude of your family.

Is your spouse starting to find excuses to skip church events? Are your kids misbehaving as a way of disqualifying themselves from being part of church activities? Is what they are witnessing behind the scenes having a negative impact on their view of God?

One of my mentors recommends that every minister give his spouse a copy of a resignation letter when he starts a new ministry. The spouse has the right to present the letter when she has had enough, or when she believes he has had enough (throwing in the towel). The minister promises to take this action seriously and the spouse understands that it’s a last resort. When a spouse brings out the letter, it doesn’t necessarily mean the minister has to resign the next day, but it does mean it’s time for some honest conversation and deep reflection.

If your spouse wanted you to resign and transition to another church or even a different vocation, is that something you’d be willing to honor?

I remember sitting in a movie theatre during a difficult time and thinking about my two boys and how I didn’t want them to grow up seeing their dad getting hammered by the church he was serving. At the time they weren’t old enough to hate the church but I could put myself in their shoes and hate it for them. As I salted the tub of popcorn with my tears, I vowed to make sure my boys grew up with a better view of church than the one I was currently experiencing.

Is having your family hate the church worth it?

Are You the Best Person to Do the Job that Needs to be Done?

“We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.”

—Romans 12:6-8 (NIV)

When I was hired by my second church, it had just endured a painful season of turmoil, followed by a season of reconciliation and healing. My job was to help the church chart a new course into the future by transitioning it from being a church in healing to a church on mission. This was something for which I was well-suited and the first few months went very well. I was having fun casting a Kingdom vision and the church was learning to dream again.

Near the end of my first year, conflict began to tear our leadership team apart, and much of the healing that had occurred over the past few years was undone. By the end of my second year, the church was hurting and in need of a sensitive, patient pastor to gently lead it as it limped along. This was not the job I was hired to do and it was not something I was equipped or inclined to do. Instead, I continued to challenge the church to sprint when it could barely walk. It was neither enjoyable or effective.

The church needed a different kind of leader than I was willing or able to be. I was slow to see this and ended up staying *way too long* as I eventually wore out even some of my most loyal friends with my aggressive—and at times, insensitive—leadership style. I was not the best person to do the job that needed to be done and we all suffered as a result.

Some are good at starting businesses or organizations from scratch. Some are good at building on what someone else has started. Some excel in maintaining what someone else has built. Some are good at tearing down what no longer serves a useful purpose. Some are best

equipped to repair what has come apart. Some are great at cleaning up messes so that whoever comes next can have a fresh start.

I've never met a pastor, or any other kind of leader, who can do all of these things well. Most of us, because of our personalities, skill-sets, and past experiences, are equipped to do one or two of these things better than the others. We quickly end up over our heads or bored to tears when we are placed in a situation that doesn't fit what we do best.

I've seen pastors who have struggled to maintain an established church be wildly successful in starting a new one.

I've seen church planters lose interest when their churches cross over from being start-up projects led by an entrepreneur to established communities that need to be maintained by a pastor.

I've seen young pastors who want to make big things happen go stir crazy because their aging churches want to be led by a steady hand rather than by an ambitious change agent.

I've seen churches that want to grow become discontent with their older pastor who is more comfortable visiting the sick and burying the dead than initiating new programs to attract young families.

As churches change or grow or shrink or age or get younger they require different kinds of leadership to guide through new seasons and fresh challenges. There is no shame in admitting that you are not the best person to see them through the next phase of their journey.

It's not always the church that changes. Sometimes it's the pastor who changes or grows or shrinks or gets older (but not younger—sorry) and needs to serve a new church in a different way. That's okay too. It is possible to get locked into one type or style of leadership by the expectations of the congregation. The only way you can exercise other gifts is to go to a new place where you can have a fresh start.

I have a friend who served a church as their youth minister for 15

years. He found himself blocked from other areas of leadership because in the eyes of many church members he was their “youth minister” and they couldn’t take him seriously in any other role. He had to move to a new church to be given a chance to be something else.

Spend some time with your discernment community exploring what kind of leadership the church is going to need in the next few years. Then conduct an honest assessment of whether you are the best person for the job that needs to be done. If not, then it may be time to move on to another church that needs most what you do best.

Have You Slipped Through the Communal Membrane?

“The only thing holding some churches together is a lack of communication.”

—Randy Harris

Imagine the church as a large, flexible membrane. This membrane is what makes community possible. It consists of everything members of the church hold in common: basic beliefs, personal style, background, heritage, shared experiences, and insider language.

Churches have a center of gravity that sits comfortably in the middle of the membrane, never touching its boundaries or testing its stretchiness. Those at the center like the way things are and have no interest in changing anything. They aren't looking to rethink their beliefs or have their assumptions challenged. They think the church is just right.

On both sides of the center will be smaller groups closer to the edges of the membrane, where the stretching occurs. At one edge are those who believe the church has already changed too much. They are stretching for the traditions of the past. If given the opportunity, they would reverse all the major decisions made by the leadership in the past twenty years and put things back just like they were in the good old days.

At the opposite edge are those who believe they are more open-minded than the rest of the church. They are stretching for the new and unknown. They believe the church is going to die if it doesn't continue to change. They're constantly pushing for more relevant worship styles and/or a more inclusive role for women in church leadership and/or more creativity in reaching out to younger generations.

As those at the far edges of the membrane push toward their perspectives, the membrane stretches. The membrane around some churches is amazingly flexible. The people at opposite ends can be worlds apart from each other, and yet the membrane holds them

together. This is what happens when a person says, "There's a lot about this church that drives me crazy, but I can't leave. It's my home." The membrane stretches, but it doesn't break.

In other churches, the membrane is remarkably fragile. All it takes is the least bit of pressure and those doing the pushing break through the membrane and end up outside the community. This is what happens when people leave their church home in search of another congregation where they'll be more aligned with the center of gravity in the middle of the membrane. Large groups sometimes bust through the membrane together and become a new community of their own. In a few sad instances, the membrane will burst like a balloon, sending members of a once strong community hurtling in all directions.

As the pastor, you occupy a special place within the membrane. It's your job to know the limits of the membrane better than anyone else in your church. You have to be able to step back and take a third-person perspective and see all the different forces at work within the membrane. You must stay in touch with those who are stretching it in opposite directions.

The most effective (and happiest) pastors are those who are able to comfortably minister from a position close to the congregation's center of gravity. One of the pastor's main tasks during the interview process is to discern how well he aligns with the congregation as it is, rather than how he hopes it will be someday. (For more on this, read [Before You Go.](#))

This is not to say you should always be in the middle of the membrane. Leadership will require you to occasionally step toward the edge and invite the church to follow. If they do, this new position will eventually become the comfortable middle, around which the membrane will reshape itself.

If they don't, then some stretching will occur. No big deal. The membrane is strong. Change takes time. If you keep stepping toward the edge or make a strategic mistake and move faster than the speed of trust, those in the once happy middle will panic and run, not walk, in the opposite direction. When this happens the integrity of the

membrane is in serious jeopardy.

It doesn't really matter whether you ended up at the stretching edge of the membrane through study and prayer, or because you panicked when the church didn't grow as fast as you thought it would, or because you let your personal preferences dictate your leadership agenda. Once there, the only thing that really matters is the awareness that if you keep pushing and the church keeps resisting, you will eventually pass through the membrane and end up outside the community. You may officially still be the pastor of the church, but you will no longer feel at home there and the church will no longer trust you.

If they don't fire you first, you should leave, because once you slip through the communal membrane, you've stayed too long.

Are You Compelled to Go in a Different Direction?

"It's not you, it's me."

—Useful Cliche

A friend of mine recently moved to a new church. He hated to leave his old church and his old church hated to see him go. But it was time.

He has three lovely young daughters. He and his wife are teaching their daughters that there is no limit to the ways God can use them in his Kingdom.

He couldn't count on his previous church to reinforce this message to his daughters. In fact, he was positive his old church would tell them the opposite.

My friend is a wise, sensitive, and godly pastor. He is firm in his beliefs about the freedom his daughters enjoy as followers of Christ. He also knew there were many godly people in his old church who disagreed with him and would oppose any move he made to change the church's official position on leadership roles for women.

He had been there long enough to have the necessary credibility to force the discussion. But he also understood that forcing his convictions on the church would cause too much trouble. The membrane wouldn't be able to sustain the discussion. So he chose to tearfully move on to another church where the issue had already been settled.

You may not agree with his convictions about what leadership positions his daughters can fill when they grow up, but that's not the point of the story. A pastor has to acknowledge when he holds the minority position on a disputable matter. If he can't peacefully hold his position and resist the temptation to use his influence as a leader to force change on an unwilling church, then it is best for him to move on.

I was acquainted with another pastor who was leading a church of about 500 people. He and a few other key leaders decided the church

needed to make some drastic changes in order to have a more effective ministry to young adults. They started pushing their agenda and incited all kinds of conflict in what had been a peaceful, unified church. When the dust settled, only fifty or sixty people who embraced the pastor's vision remained. Many long-time members had chosen to find a new church home. Most of the staff had been laid off. The church's reputation in the community was sullied and its outreach crippled. In hindsight, it would have been a much better option for the pastor to take the 50 or 60 people who were willing to follow him and start a new church, allowing those who remained to continue happily on their way with a new pastor who wasn't looking to blow something up.

Why didn't he do this? I don't know. Maybe he had bad intelligence and was led to believe more people were ready to change than actually were. Maybe he didn't care. Maybe he was convinced God wanted him to blow the church up and start over. He may have been right in his assessment in what kind of ministry would be most effective for reaching young adults. God may have been leading him in that direction. But that doesn't mean it was a good idea to try and drag an unwilling church along with him.

This idea God has placed on your heart, this message bubbling inside of you: before you do anything with it, step back and get some perspective. Visit with your discernment community. Are you holding a scroll that will taste like honey when you feed it to your church or is it actually a stick of dynamite that will blow it to kingdom come?

Are You Saying “They” Instead of “We”?

“What do you mean ‘we’ Kemo Sabe?”

—Tonto

Several years ago I had lunch with a long-time associate minister at another church. As we discussed how things were going at his church, I noticed he kept using third person plural pronouns.

He said things like, “They decided to start a new service in the fall” or “They want to start hosting youth soccer games on the field behind our building.”

“They” referred to the church’s leadership team.

I could understand why he might say “they” if he were a pew-sitter who hadn’t been consulted before those decisions had been made. But he was a part of the leadership team and had been involved in the decision-making process. He may not have liked the decisions. He may have proposed other ideas that were shot down by others on the team. Still, he was a part of the “they” that made the decisions.

His use of “they” indicated he was not only distancing himself from past decisions and but also abdicating his responsibility for helping lead the church into the future. He had slipped through the membrane and was no longer a part of the church even though he still worked there.

He left the church a few months later.

I was recently visiting with a lead pastor who was struggling to feel at home at his new church. As he described a future initiative—one that he fully supported—he started talking about what “they” wanted to do. When I asked if he realized he was saying “they” instead of “we” he said, “That can’t be healthy can it?”

He immediately recognized what he was doing and changed his

language. I think he plans to stay awhile.

Have You Learned All Available Lessons At Least Once?

"Same as it ever was...Same as it ever was...Same as it ever was...
Same as it ever was...Same as it ever was...Same as it ever was...
Same as it ever was...Same as it ever was..."

--Talking Heads

Pastors think it's their job to teach the church what it doesn't know. The truth is that every church teaches its pastor just as much, if not more, than the pastor teaches it.

For the first few years at my second church, I faced a hoard of new challenges. Each one taught me something about leadership, systems, people, or myself. I was invigorated by each one and absorbed the lessons like a sponge.

But eventually I ran out of new challenges. There were still problems to be solved and issues to address, but they had all been recycled. It was like having a merry-go-round of unbreakable stallions cycling through my office. What was instructive the first time around was frustrating the second, tedious the third, and maddening the fourth.

Soon after that, I heard Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, speak about being the kind of person who gains wisdom by only having to learn a lesson once. That's when I realized I had learned everything I could from the challenges I was facing. The church taught me what I needed to know in the first few years. After that, I kept learning the same lessons over and over again. The church wasn't growing, offerings weren't increasing, my personal growth stalled, and I was tempted to start coasting.

It was time to go somewhere else and learn some new lessons.

Are You Tempted to Schedule a Guest Speaker on Easter Sunday?

"Being a professional is doing the things you love to do, on the days you don't feel like doing them."

—Julius Erving

Take a quick look at your preaching calendar for the upcoming year. If you've scheduled a guest speaker for Easter Sunday you may be in trouble.

Here's how an elder of a church whose teaching pastor had recently resigned and transitioned out of professional ministry put it, "He was one burned-out preacher and had been for several years. Do you know how I could tell? For three straight years he scheduled a guest speaker on Easter Sunday! Preachers shouldn't let someone else preach to their church on Easter. He just didn't have the passion for it anymore."

He has a point. A pastor who can't get excited about preaching the gospel on Easter will be about as effective as a quarterback who doesn't want the ball in his hands during the last two minutes of the game with his team trailing by six points.

This principle applies to more than just Easter Sunday.

I love to preach. For years, I lived to preach. No, wait. It's probably more accurate to say that preaching kept my ministry alive. No matter what was breaking loose and hitting the fan, I could always find solace in the preparation and delivery of a sermon. When I preach, I feel like I'm doing what I was made to do.

In the final year at my second church, I endured a prolonged season where I dreaded doing the thing I loved most. I remember the darkness and despair that would greet me on Sunday mornings as I rolled out of bed. I'd look at the clock, do the math, and figure out how many hours it would be before I could hustle back home and sit in front of the TV and watch football by myself. I wasn't looking forward to worshipping with my church. I wasn't excited about sharing the

message I had prepared. I just wanted to do my job, punch the clock, and spend the afternoon making love to a plate of seven-layer nachos.

We all have occasional bad days when we have to get up and do our work regardless of how we happen to feel about it on that particular day. Most preachers are pretty good at faking it on those days when we'd rather be home watching cartoons while eating Belgian waffles topped with whipped cream and chocolate syrup. (I always gained a few pounds during my seasons of despair.) One bad day can stretch into a week that becomes a month that grows into a season. Then you wake up one day dreading doing what you do best because it no longer infuses your ministry with passion and purpose.

If I'm describing your current situation, you must take immediate action. No, I'm not saying you should resign tomorrow. But you do need to visit with a counselor or talk to your doctor about depression or change your eating habits or request a sabbatical from your board or ask your discernment community to help you figure out what's going on.

It could be that after doing some interior work you realize you've developed a toxic relationship with your church and it is killing your spirit.

If you can't improve the relationship by changing your behavior within the system, you're in danger of staying *way too long*.

Have They Changed the Rules?

“Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph.”
Exodus 1:8 (KJV)

As I’ve already made clear, I’m not a big fan of leaving a church at the first sign of trouble, but there are times when it’s best to cut and run.

Did they make promises to you during the interview that were forgotten as soon as you arrived? Did they tell you they wanted to be a certain kind of church, reaching a certain kind of people, and that they were even willing to start a new service in order to make it happen? One year later, have they reverted back to being the First Church of the Status Quo where every new idea is met with a quick and decisive “No!”?

Do they want to completely overhaul your job description after six months? After hiring you to be their preacher did they call you into a surprise meeting in which they ask you to focus on building small groups while the congregation watches Andy Stanley DVD’s on Sunday mornings?

Did the leadership team add a few new influential members to the bus who quickly kicked off a few others, causing the church to take such a sharp right turn that it nearly broke your neck?

These kind of things happen all the time and they leave pastors facing a tough choice: stay and play by the new rules or move on to something else.

I was commiserating with a former school superintendent about the similarities between superintendents and pastors. He described how every election season can be an anxious time for superintendents depending on how many school board seats are being contested. Many superintendents end up answering to a school board that didn’t hire them and doesn’t embrace the leadership philosophy that got them the job in the first place.

Pastors know the feeling. This is why announcing a new elder selection process makes some ministers more nervous than a long-tailed cat in a roomful of rocking chairs.

It also reinforces why it's wise to rent, rather than buy, for the first year or two of ministry at a new church.

To mix biblical allusions, if there arises in your church a king who knew not Joseph, then the writing is on the wall.

Was Your Biggest Mistake Taking the Job in the First Place?

“Admit your errors before someone else exaggerates them.”

—Andrew V. Mason

One way to stay too long is to take the wrong job.

A friend of mine had a nice job in the tech industry. He was invited to join a start-up company that would require him to make some short-term sacrifices for the possibility of huge long-term financial gains. He anguished over the decision for a few weeks before he said yes. A few months later he quit his new job in disgust and asked his old company if he could have his old job back. He was a great employee so they happily welcomed him back into the fold.

While most of us don't get a chance at this kind of career do-over, we all have an equal opportunity to make a similar mistake.

I don't know what the world record is for shortest time taken by a pastor to figure out he has moved to the wrong church, but I bet it makes most celebrity marriages seem like case studies in longevity.

All it takes is the congregation's version of Paul Harvey deciding to tell you “the rest of the story” as he's helping you unload the moving van. He knows every congregational secret and he tells you where every single body is buried.

Or perhaps you learn in your first board meeting that the search team failed to mention a few details, a minor one being that the entire elder group planned to resign as soon as you got “settled in.”

How did this happen?

Maybe you failed to ask a few important questions that didn't even cross your mind during the interview because you had already decided to take the job. Or you let your anxiety get the best of you and made a rash decision that never felt right from the moment you signed the

contract. What you thought was buyer's remorse, a natural occurrence in even the best of situations, was actually the Holy Spirit alerting you to take a second look. (I wrote [*Before You Go*](#) to help pastors ask better questions when interviewing a church.)

Yes, it is possible to make a huge mistake by taking the wrong job and realize you've done so almost immediately.

Now comes the big question: How long should you stay once you recognize your blunder?

You have a couple of options.

You can save face by holding on for a predetermined, culturally appropriate period of time. This means staying for at least a year, maybe two. Leaving after only one year will raise some eyebrows. You can leave after two years without having to answer too many questions. Gut it out for three and you walk away free and clear.

It's important to clarify your motives for staying. If you stick it out for a couple of years to learn a few lessons and see if it gets better, this can be a valuable experience as long as you don't take too many punches. If you stay to protect your public image and preserve the polish on your resume, you'll likely face bigger problems down the road than being stuck at the wrong church for a couple of years.

This is another instance where a discernment community can cut through the fog of your anxiety and help you determine the best course of action. They may look at the situation and tell you to shut up, grow up, and get to work. Or they may say, "You made one mistake by going. Don't make a second by staying!"

One of the staffing principles leadership gurus espouse at conferences is "hire slow and fire fast." Take your time finding the right person for the job. If you make a mistake and add the wrong person to the team, then for the good of the team and the person who has been miscast, let him go as quickly as possible so he can move on with his life and so you can begin looking for the right person.

This principle can be carefully applied in reverse. Take your time finding a new church. If you land in an impossibly bad situation, it's not doing you or them any good by putting off the inevitable. Take your lumps, admit your mistake, and move on.

This is hard to do because it's going to make you look like a flake or a quitter. People are going to wonder about your toughness and commitment to ministry. They may also question your wisdom for leaving so soon. A few perceptive friends will filter out the noise and question your wisdom for saying yes in the first place.

If God makes it clear to you, through a vision or a large fish, that he has you there for a reason and intends for you stay until his (and your) purpose is served, then make yourself at home.

Those who wish God would speak to them directly forget that when God does this in Scripture, he's usually telling someone to do something scary, hard, or dangerous. The good news: you heard from God. The bad news: he told you to stay put even though it means you're going to be persecuted and suffer. Still looking for that easy button?

But look on the bright side, if God wants you to stay for a reason beyond your comprehension, that means taking the job wasn't a mistake after all.

This is getting confusing. I think I'll wrap it up now.

In your haste to leave a bad situation, don't lose your mind and repeat your mistake. You can explain one bad move, but if you string together two or three in a row, you've got a full-blown pattern on your hands that will doom you to a lifetime of working at one church chop-shop after another, where they've never had a minister last longer than a couple of years and will become suspicious if you try to stay longer.

Have I mentioned that I wrote a [book](#) intended to help pastors avoid making this kind of mistake?

Would Jerry Springer Be Shocked By What is Going on At Your Church?

“In the end we're all Jerry Springer Show guests, really, we just haven't been on the show.”

—Marilyn Manson

Something we all know: Churches are comprised of broken, messed-up people. These broken, messed-up people can do some unbelievably stupid, immoral, and even illegal things.

As the pastor, you have to know when to laugh, when to cry, when to confront, and when to call the police.

Something we know, but don't like to talk about: Sometimes the most broken, messed-up people at a church are hidden in the leadership group. They serve as elders, deacons, and finance team members. The unbelievably stupid, immoral, and even illegal things they do can cripple the mission of a congregation for decades—if the congregation survives at all.

In some cases, rather than confront these leaders with their destructive behavior, the other leaders on the team make excuses, look the other way, or try to bury it in a grave of “ministerial confidentiality.” What they're really doing is creating a culture of secrecy that will undermine the best efforts and intentions of future leaders for generations to come.

As those in the twelve step community like to say, “You're only as healthy as your sickest secret.”

Some churches are hiding some terribly sick secrets. You may be at one right now. You know there is a problem. You suspect the leadership is hiding something. You may not have the whole story yet, but you catch a whiff of the stink every time you walk by the conference room door. When you confront the leadership about their secret, they tell you to forget about it, but you can't. Something needs

to be done. But what?

Or perhaps something happens on your watch. Money is missing. A conflict of interest has influenced a major decision. There's been an accusation of sexual harassment. The other leaders at the table—because they don't want to face the truth or alarm the church or embarrass the culprit who is a lifelong friend—do nothing about it. They minimize it to the point of talking about it like it's ancient history, even though it happened last month.

What do you do when the leadership is keeping a secret that you believe needs to be told?

If it involves the abuse of a child, then you are legally obligated as a mandated reporter to notify the authorities. End of discussion.

If it has to do with something you are not legally mandated to report, then you have a choice.

You can stay and fight for what you believe is right regardless of the consequences. You may get fired. The church may blow up. You may be left with a mess that will take years to clean up and from which the church will never completely recover.

Or you can shake the dust off your feet and leave and move on without making a public issue of your disagreement with the leaders. Let them keep their secret; it will catch up with them someday.

What you can't do is mix and match the elements of both options.

You can't stay and keep quiet. This makes you a toxic secret-keeper along with the rest of the cowards on your leadership team.

You can't leave and go public with it. This makes you an opportunistic prophet who wants the credit for being a righteous whistle-blower without having to stick around to pastor the survivors once the dust has settled.

Stay and fight or leave and be quiet.

The complexity of most church secrets will require that these options be nuanced according to the specifics of each situation. Your discernment community may be able to help you chart a path through this mine field. Also, depending on the nature of the secret, you may want to consult an attorney about the best way to responsibly proceed within the limits of the law.

Bonus scenario: Let's say you choose to leave and then get a call six months later from a pastor who is interviewing with your old church. He wants to know why you left and what questions he needs to be asking. What do you tell him? I say tell him the truth or at least give him a list of questions to ask that will give him plenty of opportunities to sniff around and smell the corpse.

I hated writing this chapter. I'm sure you hated reading it. Feel free to go wash your hands, take a shower, or spray yourself down with Lysol and then come back and finish reading.

Have You Been Offered An Irresistible Opportunity?

"If you want to do what's right for you and your family, you should probably put your name in the draft. If you want to do what's right for me and my family, why don't you stay a couple more years so we can win a lot more games?"

—John Calipari

What about when you're completely happy where you are and have no desire to leave, but are offered an irresistible opportunity to work with another church, ministry, or organization? Even though you've turned down ninety-nine other offers because they held no appeal, this one is impossible to ignore.

First, relish that you're wanted. Allow yourself to enjoy that others recognize the good work you're doing and want you to be a part of their team. There could come a time when the phone stops ringing, so don't take these affirmations for granted.

Second, not all opportunities are as irresistible as they initially appear. The joy of being wanted can become so intoxicating that you lose the ability to ask good questions and make wise decisions. In [Before You Go](#), I ask some questions you need to answer before you fall too deeply in love with the opportunity in front of you. Once you've worked through those questions, you may conclude that you're standing in front of an irresistible opportunity.

What makes it so?

While you're the only one who can define what irresistible looks like for you and your family, here are a few possibilities.

It's an opportunity :

- that gives you a chance to maximize your strengths and minimize your weaknesses.

- that will give your spouse a chance to maximize her strengths and minimize her weaknesses.
- that will give you or your spouse a chance to develop dormant gifts and passions that have, by necessity, been set aside in your current situation, but are aching to be awakened and unleashed.
- that will honor your hard work in the past by increasing your span of influence in the future. (Be careful with this one as it plays to a part of our ego that equates the size of our ministry with our success as a follower of Christ.)
- that will motivate you to be at your best every time you walk into the office.
- that your entire family is excited about. If you have teenagers this may be harder than finding our treasured unicorn on roller-skates, but you never know.
- that will give your family additional financial stability and security. I didn't think this was such a big deal when I worked with my first church, but now that I have a couple of boys who like to eat and refuse to make their own clothes, I find it to be a tad more important. Be careful if money is the top factor for leaving, but don't feel guilty if it is somewhere in the top five.
- to work with a team that is going to challenge you to keep growing in a new and exciting direction. *Who you work with is far more important than where you work.* Give me a choice between a lonely work environment in Hawaii and a team-based work environment in Tumbleweed, Texas and I'll pick Hawaii the first time. After I've learned my lesson, I'll go wherever I have to go in order to work with people I trust and who bring out the best in me.

If it is indeed an irresistible opportunity, you will face the difficult task of leaving a church you love for an offer you can't refuse. You'll struggle with feelings of guilt for leaving your flock. These feelings will be exacerbated by some in your church who have come to love you so

much they'll turn hostile and accuse you of abandoning them in their time of deepest need. These people are selfish and immature and leaving is one of the best things you can ever do for them. If you've become so essential to their faith that they can't imagine being a part of a church where you're not the pastor, your leaving will give them a chance to remember that their faith should be anchored in Jesus, not in you or any other church leader.

Those who love you and want the best for you will be disappointed to see you go, but they'll also recognize the nature of the opportunity and be thrilled that God would entrust it to you.

If you're anything like me, you'll never run out of things to feel guilty about. Saying yes to a great opportunity shouldn't be one of them.

Congratulations.

Conclusion: I Told You There Wasn't An Easy Button!

"When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship."

Acts 20:36-38 (NIV)

He called after I announced my resignation the previous Sunday. He was a single dad with three unruly kids. He was putting his life back together and had been attending our church for almost a year. He graciously named my preaching as one of the reasons he had come back to the Lord. He was becoming a friend. He didn't understand why I was leaving. I couldn't adequately explain the reasons because I didn't want to dampen his enthusiasm for his new church. All I could say was that it was time to move on.

Leaving is hard.

I sat my boys down and told them we were going to sell our house and move. They didn't like the idea. I told them God was calling us to go to Texas and plant a church. They didn't care about what God wanted us to do. They didn't want to leave their school, their friends, or the church they loved. I told them that sometimes God asks us to do difficult things and this was one of them. They came along because they believed I knew what I was doing (and because they didn't have a choice).

Leaving is hard.

I put the last box in the back of the van and looked down the long street in front of our house where both of the boys learned to ride their bikes. I walked up the steep driveway where we would lay back and look into the night sky, waiting for the first star to appear on warm summer nights. I stood in front of the swing set I spent two-and-a-half days assembling one spring and remembered how the boys never got tired of me pushing them as they swung. I closed my eyes and heard the echoes of giggles still bouncing from tree to tree, just like the ball

did when the neighborhood kids came over for a game of kickball.

I made a final pass through the house before locking it up for the last time. Each room unlocked a memory. The living room was where we opened our presents on Christmas mornings. The upstairs family room had been the place for toys, TV, and hobbies. The boys' room, now painted a neutral gray, was once a bright arena where dinosaurs and light sabers clashed.

We loved living in that house. It was a great place to potty train boys, paint a canvas, and watch Jack Bauer save the world. There were mornings when I didn't want to leave and there were days when I couldn't wait to get back to it in the evening. It was home.

Leaving is hard.

And it should be.

If it's not, then you haven't been a very good pastor to your church.

No matter how necessary it is for you to move, leaving should still feel like having a six inch strip of duct tape ripped off of a hairy leg.

Hating your job and desperately needing to make a change doesn't make it any easier to leave your friends with whom you've consumed gallons of coffee; or the handful of people you've baptized and disciplined into the way of Jesus; or the cadre of spiritual Aunts and Uncles that have helped you raise your kids; or the comforting rituals and routines you've developed to give your life meaning and order.

Who wants to be uprooted from all of that? It's almost enough to convince you to stay in an unhealthy situation and keep taking punches isn't it?

So let's conclude by acknowledging that if the prospect of leaving your church is breaking your heart, even though it appears to be what God wants you to do, this is a wicked-good thing.

It means you've given yourself away to your people. You've invested your time in them. You've asked for their help with your kids. You've become a part of your community and put down roots in your neighborhood.

In the future, if you want leaving to be easy, then harden your heart. Don't let anyone get too close. Treat them all like a collection of clients. Remain aloof and untouchable.

It's easier to leave when you've never really been there.

It is wise to lead a church with an awareness of your future departure so that it never becomes too dependent on you to do all the heavy lifting. But this is not the same thing as trying to protect yourself from the pain of leaving by pastoring your flock with a stiff arm.

Embrace this tension: Lead the church as if you're going to someday leave; love the church as if you intend to stay forever.

Pastors come and go, but love remains.

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