



What to do About Departing Parishioners

by Kurt von Schleicher

Why people leave the church.

Appropriately dealing with the so-called church "Fall-aways"—the dropouts.

Every pastor has faced a common reality: people who, for varying reasons, leave his church to go to another ...or to not go at all.

When the senior pastor is a loving servant, approachable, gracious, and sound in judgment, he will have a lower percent of leaders and people who want to leave him ..or want to leave the Lord. Many pastors, because of their caring nature, find it difficult to see parishioners leave. Having helped these people work through crises, worked shoulder-to-shoulder with them on committees, and watched them grow in their spiritual journey, pastors hate to see them go. Unfortunately, most pastors have received little, if any, training on how to deal with this kind of loss, and have no idea why people leave and how to stop the exodus before it begins. Why don't seminaries offer a class called "Attrition 101"?

People don't just wake up one Sunday morning and decide to leave the church. There are several traits and events that can precipitate this decision.

- **Spiritual immaturity.** People who leave often times have little spiritual depth and have not been "*rooted and grounded*" in the faith. Without roots, they tumble here and there.

- **Disconnected.** Often, when people leave the church, it has nothing to do with the pastor; it has more to do with a failure to catch the pastor's vision. Maybe they don't like the pastor's vision because it's not biblical. They may have their own vision, and not seeing it at work in the church, prefer to move somewhere else where they will feel more connected to the mission of the church. Maybe they just don't make a friend at the church.

- **Averse to the truth.** If the Word is being proclaimed faithfully, it can make us uncomfortable. Some people don't like being pushed out of their comfort zone.

• **Offended.** The offense may be real or imaginary. If the offense is real, it should be dealt with, or the immature will opt out and go somewhere else. If a pastor or pastors have done something stupid, or multiple things that were manipulative or abusive, they need to come clean or they will simply reap what they sow. People can vote with their feet – they can come or go. If the offense is imaginary, that is, they have taken offense when no sin was committed -- when no offense was intended, it is very hard to convince them otherwise.

• **Not hungry for the things of the Lord.** When a church is moving forward, growing spiritually, it can be irritating for those whose hearts are cold, carnal, worldly or unreceptive. Unwilling to move ahead with this congregation, they choose to go elsewhere in an effort to find a climate less challenging spiritually.

Just know that not all people leave “in sin” [I mean due to their own sin] so why tell your leaders or people they did? What makes you so sure that they are bitter?—maybe they’ve been burned by your team and want to find a place to heal-up.

We know devil’s goal is to get Christians out of church and out of fellowship with other growing Christians, where they will become useless for building God’s Kingdom of light and useless for wreaking havoc on his doomed kingdom of darkness. Pastors shouldn’t assist him in this. Jesus’ goal is that we all become fruitful and fulfilled within healthy churches! He explained, *“The sower sows the word. And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts. These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; and they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word’s sake, immediately they stumble. Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred”* [Mk. 4:14-20 nkjv]. Christ said these things so none of us would become distracted away from what really matters.

The pastor who experiences such losses must refocus on the Word and remember that God will restore the soul that stays close to Him. He needs to maintain a right spirit and continue preaching and living the Word (or do a better job at applying it). He needs to tenderly and proactively go minister to those who were hurt in his church. He needs to quickly address those who do the hurting (even if he is one of them).

If leaders want to go minister elsewhere, kindly let them. We all must learn to love with an open hand. A flitting bird that lands in your hand, will only struggle to get away from you if your hand closes on their legs just to make it stay. Don’t act like a jilted teenage boyfriend. Turn away your gaze to Christ. We give sinners on the streets an easy out when we are witnessing to them. It’s because we don’t want to leave a sour taste in their mouths. We want them to be more open next time God chooses to use a Christian to plant seeds in their hearts. Why then aren’t we as gracious with God’s saints?

The pastor and his family would be wise to consistently love people on the way out, rather than seek to control them or to heap accusations, condemnation or guilt on God's people. Most Christians want to leave right – in a way that glorifies the Lord. Why give volunteers inordinate job assignments to replace themselves or to clean up in their department (when it's not even dirty). *"Hey congregant, did God lead you here? Why would He lead you away then or not replace you with someone that could do a better job?"* They could turn around and ask you, *"With all due respect, why hasn't your ministry been excellent enough to win people that have the slightest desire to minister to others? Why aren't people lined up at the door to help in any department of this church?"*

If a leader wants to be sent out to minister elsewhere, you should be glad that this is in their heart. The devil doesn't make people want to minister. Help them, rather than hinder them. Be quick to forgive. When people are authentically loved, they will know it and many will return later with a stronger commitment to the vision of the house. The hard-hearted pastor who smears – who speaks negatively about these people's spiritual condition, or rehearses their sins to his team ..or to the people will reap what he sows. Team members who loved the pastors former-best friends – these who have left – will know that the pastor will do this to them if they leave. They will become more silent and make preparations in view of having their reputations and good names trashed by the person they trusted.

Before you call it a "blessed subtraction" pastor, find out if God would be blessed by them departing. Ask them if they are being forced out or led out. Offer prayer support. Some megalomaniac pastors flippantly quote Matthew 7:13-14, ***"Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."*** – as the reason for their inordinate attrition rate – the avalanche of people sliding out the back door. They say, ***"We uncompromisingly tell the truth, that's why we've remained such a small church."*** But they miss listening, miss proper preparation (including prayer) and miss recognizing that their own mean-spirited-sins (or family's sins) are the very reason for such loss. Sure there is an offense in the cross. The Gospel will never be "in" or vogue. But we are not to add to this offense, or yes, we will be the reason they ditch. Jesus Christ did thin the crowds at times with his truth-speaking; it was because he loves people enough to tell them the truth not because he wanted to control them. The Bible says, ***"From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. Then Jesus said to the twelve, 'Do you also want to go away?' But Simon Peter answered Him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life'"*** (see John 6:53-68).

How about you? Does the message of your life (on-on-one, and on-on-more-than-one) preach eternal life or death? Have you ever been open enough to ask why the people why they want to leave you?