

Quick Win: How to deal with the pain of people leaving your church

Hey guys, welcome to this quick win on how to deal with the pain of people leaving your church. So where's the win in this quick win? Well people leaving is painful. So I want to normalise that pain and give you some ideas on how to process this particular pain that pastors and key leaders and churches really feel very strongly.

It's important to know that it's normal and healthy to feel this pain. It hurts when people leave they don't even bother contacting us let alone thanking us. It hurts when people go to the latest hot spot church in town or they dump on us as they go, all the things that they haven't said, well they've been there for years but feel like they're going to dump on you when they leave. That hurts. Or maybe even slandering us and criticizing us behind our backs when they leave.

So, how do you deal with this very real pain? There are a few hard issues I want to look at is

Accept it as the norm

Number one, accept it as the norm in today's world. Internally go, you know what this is what happens in today's world, people leave jobs, people leave homes, people move, people shift. It's normal in today's world.

Bless everyone disposition

Secondly, for your hearts sake, develop a bless everyone disposition. Decide that you're not going to burn bridges with anyone as far as it's in your power. Speak well of them as much as you can, depending on what their behaviour is like of course, but kind of remember 1 Corinthians 13, love doesn't keep a record of wrong doings, but decide to be blessing people as they go.

Take care of your own heart

Cry out to the Lord about this pain, grieve the pain when it really hurts. Focus on Jesus as the one who's building your church. Talk to colleagues and talk with your key leaders about it.

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When it becomes problematic in your church, call it out, it will be the elephant in the room anyway, and it's important to process this with the people in your world.

Okay, let's move on to some process points, a few points there for your heart, but a few process points here.

Work out the why

It's important to work out the why of leaving. Why are people leaving our church?

Bad reasons

There are bad reasons of why people leave. Maybe people won't heed Biblical advice. Maybe they've suddenly become anti the pastor or anti a major change point. Maybe they're upset over programs or vision or upset over something in the church. Maybe there's been a big argument with someone in the church, who knows.

They might even be challenged by a current theme about finance or evangelism or a change in worship style.

I call these bad but in reality some of them are just part of the process of normal church life and while they may appear bad on the surface, they're probably good in helping people sift and sort whether they should be in your church.

So they're not all bad even though there might be some bad amongst them.

Good reasons

I think it's also good to acknowledge there are good reasons why people leave your church. They move away, they go to another region or another city.

They might need a fresh start. They might want a different focus. Maybe the culture has shifted and they don't fit any more. Maybe all their friends have left and they're kind of not in that circle of connection anymore.

Who knows, but there are good reasons, healthy reasons and it's good to acknowledge that why people leaving.

Work out the who

It's good also not only work out the why, but work out the who of who's leaving. There are people who are moving away and I see these kind of three distinct groups. People are moving away, people who are moving on and then a group that I call problematic people.

Toxic people, church jumpers, fringe people, backsliders. I think it's important to develop policies and processes for each of these groups of people who are leaving. John, you're saying, really a policy about people leaving? I think even if it's unwritten, and I think it's good to write it down, but even if it's unwritten, it's good to kind of work out to help you deal with the pain.

Policies and processes

The policies and the processes you have in place will depending on the type of leaving, why people are living and who is leaving.

So let me have a look at it and give you a few ideas on this.

Moving away

So for people who are moving away, they're going to another city or another town, I would give them some sort of send off, but I'm not a fan of public in front of the whole church send-offs. I'm happy for it to happen at a departmental level. I'm happy for it to happen with a private appointment with the pastor or a coffee with the pastor and some sort of send-off that's at a level that's not to public.

Now in a smaller church you may want to do it in a Sunday service, but beware of doing this too often, it can be demoralising for everybody. Hey, everyone's leaving town and you have send-offs every second week because everyone's leaving down. I'm not a huge fan of send-offs publicly, but you can do it privately.

Cultural differences

There are people who are moving on because of cultural differences. They may be good or bad reasons but give them a send-off appropriate to their tenure, the length of time in the church, their role and also the reason for moving on.

Again I'm not a fan of the public thing, I've said that often enough for you to know that, but do something with people if they give you the opportunity to bless them as they go.

Problematic group

Then you've got this problematic group, toxic people, unhappy people who are moving on. Fringe people who turn up every couple of months and suddenly they haven't turned up for six months. Church jumpers who are with you for 6, 9 or 12 months and then move on to another hot spot in town or backsliders.

Generally my advice is with toxic, fringe and church jumpers, let them go. Bless them but let them go. Don't chase after them.

With backsliders, I think, pastors at some level need to follow through on backsliders to give them the opportunity to come back to Christ and back into the life of the church.

When to push the panic button

There's one time to light the red flare, to push the panic button, to break the glass, push the fire emergency button. If good people are leaving in numbers, there's reasons for you to have a look at that.

Follow up those people, ask them to be candid and give you reasons. This is painful and hurtful I know but this will be an audit on your church that you need to make changes. If you have good people leaving in solid numbers, there's a problem in the church and you as the pastor and the key leaders need to resolve that problem.

Dig deep, face the issue, call it out and make the adjustments that are necessary.

Well, this hasn't been a heartfelt, I've kind of done heart and processes, but I hope this will help you deal with the pain of people leaving your church.

God bless.