

Six Reasons People Leave Your Church

By John D. Duncan

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

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

One church member pained my soul when he stopped me dead in my tracks. "Pastor," he said, "we're leaving the church. We're just not getting what we need here." It was as if a truck had dumped a bucket of nails onto the road. Now I swerved, trying to miss the pointed critters. Their sharp points, however, punctured my spirit. For days I felt stranded like a tired traveler with a flat tire.

Why would they want to leave our church?

- Why do people become dissatisfied with their church?
- What reasons do they give for seeking another church home?
- How might you handle their departure?

Six Reasons People Leave

1. Poor leadership

When the family announced their departure, I made it a point to visit in their home. I asked them to share their feelings. I requested honesty. "We just don't like the way you're running things." In those days, some 10 years ago, my inexperience led to poor decisions. I inherited a church with problems. What church does not have problems? But the problems grew like a fast-growing bacteria.

- Financial problems worried the church.
- Morale problems infected the church.
- A lack of vision created an internal sickness.
- Members began to place blame for the troubles.

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

2. Different Style

I have watched people exit our church, but I have also seen them enter our church. When one couple joined our church, they confessed, "We just wanted something different." Translated, that means they wished for a different style.

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

3. Specific Program

“How did you discover our church?” I asked a woman who quizzed me about the church. “We heard about the church because of the youth program. Some friends told us about your youth ministry. Our kids attended on Wednesday night and Sunday morning. You have an active youth group. That’s how we discovered the church.”

The other extreme greeted my ears, too. “Why did you leave our church?” I questioned a former member. “We really like the Music Ministry of our new church,” they responded.

It is not uncommon for people to leave your church for a ministry that fits their needs. It is not uncommon for folks to seek a place tailored to their specific interests or gifts.

4. Disillusionment

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

These people remove themselves from the church out of frustration with structure or bureaucracy. I once heard of a man who left a church because it did not give enough to benevolence. He wanted the church to take its end-of-the-month reserves and give to the poor. His frustration incited his exit. Disillusionment might cause people to avoid the church for the rest of their lives.

5. Inner Hurts

A close church member invited me to lunch one day. He dropped a truckload of hurt into my lap. He talked about troubles with his children. He mentioned problems at work. He shocked me when he informed me of his imminent departure from our church. “It’s in the best interest of our family,” he softly spoke. I drove to the church that day disappointed. I ate my steak lunch, but the news ate at my stomach the rest of the day. I agonized over his words. Self-doubt crept into my mind. What did I do wrong? What could I do to keep this family? What could I change to keep them happy? Why did I fail with this family? These thoughts bounce the heart when church members leave your church.

One year later I received news about the family. This helped interpret our lunch meeting. The sad news explained the couple’s divorce. I truly believe a deep inner hurt caused this family to leave the church. Rather than seek help in the church, they fled the church. They retreated to ease the surprise of their impending breakup.

As a pastor I have observed this kind of church exit. A family leaves to conceal their child’s drug problem. A single leaves feeling deserted by the church. Though people try to accept the single, she never feels a part of the church. Her inner hurt keeps her from accepting herself. Not every person who leaves the church because of inner hurt leaves on bad terms. Some leave to seek answers to their hurt. Still others take flight to find the acceptance they have missed.

6. Church Size

Another reason church members may leave your church is the size of the church. Two years ago our church grew from a small church to a medium- sized church. A faithful family began to miss church activities. I attended a basketball game one night, where I saw this couple with their small children.

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

How to Handle the Departure

The reasons I've mentioned for leaving a church are not exhaustive. Neither do I intend to produce simplistic answers. The hard fact of the narrow road of ministry is that people do pack their bags to journey to another church.

Yet, I know ministers grieve when this happens. Those words, "don't take it personally, but . . ." echo in the chambers of the heart. How else can a minister take it? How can a leader handle these departures from the church? After all, maybe the truth is, how can you not take it personally?

1. Learn From It

When church members leave your church, ministry lessons unfold. Sometimes I visit those who make the church exit. By listening, I learn about people. I also learn about myself. Better yet, I learn more about service to God.

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

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

2. Pray For Them

Ultimately, when church members leave your church, concern for their spiritual condition becomes primary. Pray that those people can find a church that feeds them spiritually. Ask God to provide healing for their hurts. Request the Lord's guidance as they wander down uncertain trails. Praying for them nourishes their spiritual life. It also encourages your attitude toward them, especially if they spoke painful words upon their exit.

3. Open the Gate

Leave the gate open. This may sound strange, but when church members leave your church, let them go. Begging them to stay serves little purpose. Open the gate for their departure. Bless them as they leave.

Always leave the gate open for their return. One of my greatest joys of ministry came because of an open gate. A family left for a new, fresh road to another church. Six months later, they wished to return. "Would it be okay if we came back?" they asked through a mutual friend. "Sure," I said. The family returned and grew spiritually. They now minister wonderfully in the church. It's the Lord's church, and the best way to handle those who walk to another church is to remember this.

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

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

The key is to remember, it's the Lord's church. Churches should focus on this truth. When they do, time heals wounds. Conflict embraces resolution. Anger gives way to joy. Emptiness surrenders to fullness. When the back door opens, God often brings twice the number in the front door. When the church is a revolving door, maybe the key to church growth is to have more coming than you do going. Keep a sign out front that says, We're Always Open for YOU. Who knows when someone might just drive by, stop, and come on in.