

CONCLUDING A MINISTRY

Virgil Warren, PhD

Under most circumstances when you take a ministry of any kind, do it as an open-ended experience. Give no thought to how long you will be there, because you should not be interested in climbing ladders so much as serving Christ. Your motive is to “bloom where you are planted” rather than look past what you are doing in order to discover “greener pastures” elsewhere. As a primary motive if you focus on moving up the ladder, you are probably not so much concerned to improve the upcoming situation as to improve your own standing. It is a form of “building on another man’s foundation.”

I. Reasons Ministries Come to an End

A. Larger opportunities unexpectedly become available.

Since you have only one life to live, it makes sense to use it to influence as many people as possible. Moving to larger circumstances is good stewardship. A word of caution, nevertheless, applies to these “larger opportunities.” Another ministry may look better from a distance than it will up close. The ones offering you this opportunity may not have everybody behind them in the offer. Furthermore, the situation may be too big for you right now. You do better to pass up a “golden opportunity” than get yourself into something that is “over your head.” To the other people, who are looking at you from a distance too, you may look like the right man more than you really are.

Sometimes the present situation is in good order and someone else can come in and carry on the work quite well, whereas this other opportunity needs some special expertise you have. This possibility likewise makes a sensible basis for changing ministry.

A significantly “bigger financial package” elsewhere can be tempting if your present support is not strong. Try not to let money, however, be a decisive factor. You can probably solve that issue easier than some other ones that cause pressures in ministry.

B. The church may have developed past the level of your capacity to lead it. While adding staff would seem to be a better way to deal with such a “nice problem,” the fact is that you may not have the administrative skills to work in multiple ministry. Some people do not feel comfortable turning things over to other people’s oversight. They only feel in touch if they are personally leading that aspect. Such persons cannot function well in a church above two hundred because the demands are too great and the tasks are too many.

C. Ministers sometimes change interests. They may develop a specialty they can pursue—conducting marriage enrichment seminars, teaching in a Bible college, going to the mission field, working with special groups like Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses, and so on.

B. Ministers simply run out of resources for ministry. When changing ministries, preachers will say that they have taken the congregation about as far as they can. That may mean simply that they see no more potential for the congregation. Often it simply means that they have run out of resources. They have used up their “sermon barrel,” they have run out of topics for preaching and teaching, they do not know of anything else to try in order to improve the life quality of the people or the numerical growth of the church, or they do not know of anyone else to call on. Changing ministries under these circumstances leads to their repeating that same three- or four-year set of things somewhere else. It would be better for them to do some reading, get some input from other ministers, or develop some new skills. Otherwise the same thing will happen again in another three or four years.

C. A minister may conclude that he is not being effective enough to warrant continuing in his present location. Frequently the real problem is that ministers—especially when they are younger—do not have a realistic expectancy about how much effort and time it takes to turn things around and begin to make progress.

There are several patterns to progress. One is a big splash right away—a flash in the pan—followed by a backing off to the original level or even below. A minister may throw himself into the work at a pace he cannot maintain, or he may be able to make a good first impression that is not sustained as people start to “see through him.” This pattern often ends up being worse than no progress at all because it disillusiones people, and future efforts by himself and his successors are thwarted because people do not want to get their hopes up only to be let down again.

Another pattern is a seemingly slow upward incline. Nothing flashy, but the job is getting done and the gains are maintained. After a few years of relatively slow progress, there may be quite a bit to show for the effort. In some situations this is the only kind of growth that is realistic. There may not be a lot of people qualified or available from the congregation to help with the work. Leaving because the improvement is not very spectacular would be unfortunate. In a church that has been stagnant for years, this kind of progress should not be belittled.

A third pattern is exponential progress. At the beginning there may be apprehensions to overcome, negatives to be neutralized, handles to be found, confidence to be established. Local leaders may need to be trained one-by-one. During the first year or so improvement may seem slow, but then it begins to pick up steam as skills improve and growth dynamics take hold.

Make sure that you are not identifying progress simply as numerical growth. Other factors reflect qualitative growth. Increased offerings are a good sign. There may not be more people, but the same ones may be strengthening their involvement. There may be less bickering and more friendly exchanges. The people may be standing around longer after church just visiting with each other. They may be starting to take part in ways they did not do before. There may be more volunteering. There may be some increase in the practice of spiritual exercises, and so on. You should be concentrating on what is happening more than on what is not happening yet. It may come in due time.

D. There are negatives in the present work. Before deciding to leave, you need to take inventory as objectively as you can. As a matter of fact, there are probably weaknesses both in you and in the congregation. Neither one should try to locate blame entirely in the other.

More ministries do seem to come open because of deficiencies in the minister than in the church. Consequently, you may need to take a long, hard look at the quality of your own work and the intensity of your service even though it is easier to put blame elsewhere.

Listen beyond the specific criticisms. Many times people are legitimately uneasy about how things are going, but they misidentify the problem. Sometimes they do not want to come right out and tell you what is bothering them about you or your ministry because it may be too “touchy.” Maybe you or your wife are too bossy sounding, too withdrawn, too slow-moving. Your personal hygiene may need improvement or you are too sloppy in your dress. You may be boring in the pulpit. If the real difficulty is something they do not think you can change or are likely to change, they will bring up other things that are in a sense “excuses”; but they may really be doing it to keep from destroying you with “a low blow.”

E. Sometimes ministers are asked to leave. With rare exceptions, do not try to hang on to a ministry if the leadership no longer supports your work or asks for your resignation. Such a request is somewhat unusual. Most of the time if a congregation is dissatisfied with your ministry, growing discontent and dwindling attendance will signal the discontent before the situation gets this far. You will be tempted to protect your self-image and save face.

II. People to Be Considered in Changing Ministries

A. Your concern needs to be for the flock. If there is criticism of your ministry, you need to find out how many people are dissatisfied. Criticism often seems more extensive than it really is because it “sticks out.” A few vocal people can make a bigger impression than they should be allowed to make. You also need to figure out whether this handful of people has some hidden agenda. Occasionally some friend or relative has become available for ministry; their objection to you is only a ruse for trying to get this other person. That may be coupled with a “power play” to solidify control of the congregation by getting someone they can handle or someone they perceive to be on their side in some way. You have to ask yourself whether the situation will be improved by your leaving, whether the problems will disappear, whether the congregation can get a stronger man you are.

Whenever possible, make your change of ministry at a time when things are going well— when you have worked your way through financial difficulties, a building program, a power struggle, or a personality conflict. Leaving during progress tends to insure the congregation’s positively moving from this ministry to the next one. It makes a better situation for your successor and bodes well for you in obtaining another good place to serve as well. Leaving a church in the midst of difficulties only complicates solving them.

If there is discord, remember that most dissatisfaction with a minister does not involve everyone in the church. There are people who will support you even if they think your work is not especially effective; they do not want to hurt you personally. Others are you friends; do not overly encourage their supporting you. You do not want to divide the church if you can avoid it. By all means do not yield to the temptation to “choose up sides” or peel off 15% or 20% of the church and start a splinter group in another part of town. Unless the town has 15,000 or 20,000 people in it, you are not likely to pull off starting a

new church under negative conditions. Most groups like these dissolve within two or three years because, among other things, you will probably get disillusioned with such an effort even more easily than you would have with the total congregation. When you leave this new cell group, the rationale for its existence largely goes with you because you were the source of identity that held it together.

Do not “bad mouth” the church to people in the community. After you are gone the congregation needs to continue serving as the only witness for Christ that many of the people in the area have. If the church people themselves are as unchristian as you think they are, the people in town probably know it already. If they do not know it, you will not necessarily come off looking good anyway. Many non-Christians already distrust preachers, and these are perhaps their neighbors, friends, and relatives you are accusing.

As much as lies in you, close out your ministry with an image of control, strength, grace, and maturity. Do not misuse your pulpit privileges on your last Sunday to deliver a scathing condemnation of the audience or even the ones who are pushing for your demise. You come off stronger if you keep your head and do not resort to defending yourself.

B. Think seriously about what is best for those who are spiritually dependent on you. People that have come to the Lord through your efforts may lose heart if you leave over a minor problem or for personal gain. You do not have to explain to them the negative things that are causing you to relocate. If possible, preserve their involvement in that church even though (some of) the people there have not treated you fairly perhaps. The spiritual welfare of the ones you have brought this far is more important than winning their sympathy as a way to relieve some of your own hurt or justify your stance in the controversy. You should visit with those you have more recently won to the Lord to reinforce the fact that they have been won to the Lord and not to you. You will want to show them that any loyalty they may be inclined to feel toward you is best expressed by being faithful to Christ and active in this church.

C. Finally, you do have to consider what is best for you. It may seem easiest to leave under a false morals charge, but doing so will frustrate the ones in the church who know better and it may look to people distant from the situation that you are guilty. Leaving too soon under any circumstance may make the next congregation unsure whether to take the chance that you might do the same thing again with them. Some preachers have a life-long pattern of staying for two or three years and then moving on. That does not look well on their record and you too can foster the image of being a “quitter” by changing ministries too quickly.

On the other hand, feeling obligated to “hang in there” at all costs may end up souring you on ministry. Rejection can be devastating if it is drawn out over a long period of time. It would be better to leave this ministry than to leave the ministry.

D. You must decide what is best for your family. You do not want your wife or children to get a sour taste for ministry or even for the Lord because of what is happening in this church. If the financial and time demands are too great, the strain can affect them more adversely than it does you. Trying too hard to hang in there despite disheartening criticism may affect relationships with the rest of your own family. Without realizing it, you may be “taking it out on” your wife and kids. Dealing with too much stress may weaken you enough psychologically that you cannot model adequately for them the power of Christ in your life.

Difficulties you could normally handle may run over you in this weakened condition. Your depressive or aggressive behavior is not a good model for your children to see in you.

E. Consider the man who will follow you in the work. The easier you make it for him the better. Particularly if the move is under good circumstances, you can help him greatly by sharing information that will save him time getting started.

F. You have to live above your feelings. One of the most important principles in life is making decisions on the basis of values and principles rather than emotions. That is a lot harder to do than it is to say. But it is especially important in ministry because there is more at stake here than your own welfare. You have to consider the good people you may be deserting if you quit over a few critics whom in effect you will be allowing to control the church.

III. Procedures to Follow When Leaving

A. When you decide to make a move, let the elders know about it first. Doing so indicates your respect for their responsibility in the congregation. In most cases it is preferable to let them know as a group so there is no implication that you are closer to one/some than to the rest.

B. Personally visit with those whom you have more recently won to Christ (see above).

C. Give the congregation a plan of operation they can use until they obtain another minister. It is not a good idea, however, to get very involved in helping them select your successor. If he does not work out, it may be a reflection on you. You may put the congregation and some potential minister in contact with each other, but more than that is probably not wise.

D. Be careful about going back to the congregation. If you have been there very long and if it has been a positive experience, you may receive calls to go back for a funeral or to do a wedding or to perform a baptism. About the only exception would be marrying or burying a relative. You do not want to undercut succeeding ministers' leadership. If the people are insistent, have them talk to him about your involvement and have him get in contact with you about it. Make it clear that you will participate only in a minor way and simply because of your love for them. Who performs baptism, of course, is not significant and they should understand that; consequently, going back to baptize someone is something rarely appropriate.

Be careful even about going back to visit members of the church informally. Do not go back very soon; and when you do return, do not do it very often. You do not want to give the present minister any feeling that you are encouraging their unresponsiveness to his leadership. Obviously the range of acceptable interaction depends on the kind of rapport you have with him. If you do go back for a visit, drop in to see him while you are there, preferably before seeing anyone else.

E. Take care of all your financial obligations before you leave. Do not borrow from church members in order to leave debt-free. In fact, it is not a good idea to borrow from church members anytime. That tends to put you under their control or create some negative feelings if you cannot readily get them repaid.