

IMMERSE

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Wise Moving On

By: Mark Riddle

All of us get to that pivotal ministry moment when we ask those big questions. *Do I belong here? Am I being effective? Does God have another position for me?*

And the biggest one of all: *Is this ministry context healthy for me?* Maybe you feel that no one in your church understands. Maybe you wonder if they know you at all. Maybe your pastor is a jerk. It could be a parent, a grandparent, a difficult kid. Or maybe you've hit that life stage where you're questioning big concepts like *calling* and *purpose* and, because of that, you feel like you don't fit in your church anymore.

It's these moments where we start feeling stuck. The situation is too complex, the valley feels too long and too remote. No one has a kind word. The team feels combative. Parents look like they're packing swords. You feel the sting of stones thrown by others. Maybe you've been slandered? Maybe you've been picked on or verbally assaulted.

The energy being directed toward you seems disproportionate to the things that sparked all of this. You're trusting in God, but you find yourself on edge. You feel the temptation to react instead of respond. You hurt in ways you've never hurt before.

Uncertainty begins to take full charge of the moment. You wonder if you need to move on, to leave this church and find a new job, maybe even a job outside the church. You wonder aloud what job you could get with a master of divinity. If you're married, your spouse carries the pain too. They feel the weight of the situation but have no place to channel their hurt or wounded-ness except through you. It makes the whole situation worse. Emotions are high.

Stuck doesn't even begin to describe how you feel.

You look at your finances, and you feel more stuck. You look at your spouse's vocation or your kids' school and feel more complexity. You love

the people you work with, especially a handful of volunteers and the youth. Who will take care of them?

The pressure builds.

You're brought to tears for the first time in a long time. You let them flow and you weep, unable to hold back the pain from the burden you've been carrying. The frustration, the hope, the love, the fear and the disappointment come out of you in liquid form.

Is there a right way to handle this? Maybe, but you're likely not thinking clearly. There is only you, making prayerful, God-honoring decisions. You know that God works things together for good; that he takes the past and makes it good; that he heals and helps us re-inhabit our pasts in more healthy ways.

But even knowing that, you wonder if the God-honoring decisions you are trying to make will become good. How do you sort this out? You begin to slide into depression. Fear and trembling once sounded romantic but no longer. Stuck-ness is settling in. *Energy*, *passion* and *call* are fuzzy words from the past. Burnout resonates in your soul, and you begin to question your faithfulness.

Hear this: *You are loved*.

Did you hear me? My friend, you are loved.

Paul reminds us that nothing can separate us from God's love (Romans 8:38-39). That being true, remember this. There is no parent, no pastor, no failed ministry program—nothing that can sever that love. That may not fix the issue you're facing, but it may change your perspective, even if just a little. You have made a difference, so live *knowing* you've made a difference. Trust who God has been in your life, and rely on who God will be for your future.

Occasionally, well-meaning people tell you this is part of ministry. They say that being attacked or feeling deep depression is part of the youth ministry landscape. They claim that while it feels like you're experiencing the slow death of your soul, you're actually connecting with the character of who Jesus was. These well-meaning people tell you to stick it out and to *count it all joy*. This, they say, is what faithfulness looks like. You begin to feel guilty for considering moving on.

These people are wrong.

With that under your belt, remember this. Every situation is more malleable than we think. Feeling stuck or facing a situation that appears to be planted firmly in concrete is often not the reality of the moment. You have very real choices and decisions to make. You have power. What healthy decisions do you need to make in this moment? Make the one that's best for you, your health and the health of your family. This isn't selfish; it's faithfulness. You can't control the actions of others. Nor can you carry the burden of their responsibilities, actions or decisions. You have power of you and how you respond.

You are not alone. You are the beloved of God, even when it feels like you are forsaken.

Seek Help and Counsel Wisely

You might feel like you've got a target on your back. Others might see that target, take aim and fire at you with bad advice. They'll call. Facebook you. Text you. Show up at your office. There's something about a broken person that creates sharks in the ministry waters. They smell blood in the water, and they're searching for a snack. They're always present and so much so that they're often the first people who present themselves to help. They *look* like friends, and they sound friendly, but their advice is laced with selfishness and destruction. Their words sound so sweet. But we make a mistake when we choose to listen to these people.

My friend, you need help.

- Discover a physical manifestation of God's love. Find people who can love on you, and soak.
- Find the oldest person in your church who isn't connected to youth ministry. Buy this person lunch, tell your story, listen to this person's wisdom. Enjoy this person's presence with you.
- Drive three towns away and spend the night in a hotel. Cry, pray, sleep and feed yourself good food. Or engage your community of friends and be with them. Let them say what they need to say.

Then consider whom you can talk to. Maybe it's a ministry friend who doesn't live in your context. Maybe it's a ministry leader. Find someone who can invest in you with wise counsel. Listen to that person's words. Let them encompass you and the valley you are in.

Choose to Leave Courageously

If your church is killing your soul, you need to leave. If your church is hurting your spouse's soul, you need to leave. It's not more godly to stay. All too often we equate personal abuse with living like Jesus. We say to ourselves that Jesus was abused, therefore we should be abused, treated poorly or be paid badly. Those are lies, and too many pastors have stayed too long in ministry situations that are abusive, and they're living out the damage of that.

Every teen deserves a loving community of adults, but not every church deserves a youth worker, regardless of the magnitude of their financial resources. Having a youth pastor on staff is a privilege for a church, not a right. Your passion, call, marriage and hopes for kids aren't worth sacrificing for an entitled church.

Leaving courageously means saying two things simultaneously to your church—both, "I love you" and "Our chemistry is different." Living that out will feel as if you are walking a tightrope. It's a tall task to balance honoring your pastor; loving your enemies; living the truth; speaking carefully but

justly; empowering families; keeping your integrity; building the kingdom; respecting those who've come against you; facing those who've slandered you; and encouraging others while not playing the victim. There is no perfect way to do it. There is only you, faithfully giving it your best and trusting God along the way. That is all that's required of you.