

## Why Do People Leave Your Church?

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In my decades as lead pastor, one of the things I most struggled with was the loss of people from our church. It was hard not to take each loss personally and to begin asking myself the question, “What could I have done better to keep these sheep?”

I blamed my inferior leadership skills and an inadequate assimilation strategy. Thankfully, not everyone left. In fact, I was blessed to see some significant growth in a couple churches I pastored. However, I experienced enough loss and disappointment to cause me to question my effectiveness as a pastor. Over time, God began to reshape my expectations to a more realistic point of view.

Why do people leave your church? Let me count the ways. Some for good reason, some not so good, and others for tragic reasons.

**For good reason:** People get called away by job transfers or the call to another field of ministry. That call might even include partnering with another local church, or to be more closely associated with family. Assuming these moves are cases where people have discerned through prayer that this is God’s leading, we release them with our blessing.

Some attend for a while and recognize their theology or philosophy of ministry is not in line with your church and see another community as a more suitable match. Again, we release them with our blessing knowing that unity in the body of Christ is paramount. With a gracious spirit we understand Christ’s kingdom is broader than our particular theological viewpoint or style of ministry.

No doubt, there may be other good reasons people leave your church, but these are some that come to mind.

**For reasons not so good:** Into this category I put those who drop out with no explanation or clear reason for leaving. These are those who resist your efforts to follow up. You’re left with no communication so you never really know the reason. It’s also true that those who do let you know, present a reason that is not always the real reason. “I’m just not being fed” is a common one.

I also put into this category those who were never sufficiently sold on or committed to the vision of your church. These have been influenced by the consumerism of the day so that the church is seen as a place to receive more than a place to give of themselves. Problems, needs and challenges that surface in every ministry frighten these people. Rather than hanging in and being part of the solution they move on to another church that has better programs. There are some in

this category you could never please, and after all, ultimately we're not in the people pleasing business.

Sometimes people have failed to find a personal connection with the community and relationships that matter within the church. Some of this falls on us, but not all of it. These hurt when you've poured your heart and soul into ministering to them and they suddenly leave as though your relationship never really mattered. I've counseled individuals or couples in my pastoral role and lost them simply because I knew too many of their problems and it was hard for them not to think I was preaching at them. Thankfully, many go the other way with this, grow in Christ, and feel even more committed to the church.

**For tragic reasons:** Church splits go here. Innocent people can be deeply wounded and just want to run. When you as the pastor are lied about or misunderstood and a false accusation takes root in the community, these are the most painful losses of all.

Here we also place those whose departure signals a loss of their faith. They've come under the influence of a cult or damaging teaching that erodes their ability to trust God and believe His word is reliable and true. These days, there are some subtle and dangerous doctrines filtering into the local church that have led people down a wrong path or turned them into cynics about the church in general. This naturally results in their neglecting the assembly of believers which harms them.

**Let me remind you of two realities that** changed my perspective as a pastor. They really have to do with adjusting our expectations:

**The example of Jesus** - Jesus taught us to expect betrayal, rejection and opposition. In fact he taught us that this would be our cross. No pastor can go through his ministry unscathed by pain and rejection. Jesus suffered these and he calls us to expect them as well. We can resent it and feel sorry for ourselves, or we can count it a privilege to suffer along with him.

Jesus also showed us that our words will not always be favorably received. Remember the parable of the farmer who planted seed. In that parable it was only one of the four soils that ultimately produced a positive outcome.

Finally, remember that Jesus shows us by his example that growing the multitude was the least of his priorities. When many he taught were offended and left, he turned to his disciples and said, "Do you want to go too?"

**The example of Paul** - In 2 Timothy 4:9-18, Paul was suffering the loneliness and isolation of prison without the support of friends. Demas fell prey to a love for the present world and deserted Paul. Others like Titus and Crescens left for good reason to minister elsewhere, but he was feeling the effects of the loneliness that can come into the life of a pastor. Alexander actually did Paul great harm turning on him and publicly opposing his ministry which also hurt him deeply.

**Final Words:** If you're suffering losses in spite of all your best efforts and intentions and you've grown tired and weary, if you've prayed and sought the Lord for better outcomes with what feels like little effect, be encouraged. You're in good company. Adjust your expectations to match those Paul and Jesus modeled.

Find your own specific calling and be faithful to fulfill it according to the gifts and talents God has given you. In other words, find the niche your church alone can address, leaving the outcome to God with confidence in him. If you're not already meeting in a John 17:23 pastor support group, seek one out or allow us to help you find other pastors in your community who love Jesus and love his Word. You'll be blessed to connect with them and discover you're all facing very similar challenges.

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