

When It Is Time to Leave

by Bob Young¹

As my wife and I look back across 40+ years of ministry including a dozen years in Christian higher education, we have wrestled many times with the perpetual ministry question—to leave or not to leave. While my working agreement with churches says that I am rehired every year, it has seldom happened. One of the most difficult aspects of ministry has been to get church leaders to do annual evaluations of our shared ministry.

Looking back over a life of ministry and preaching, I find it a bit incredible that we have served in full-time ministry with only six churches. We spent almost 20 years with only two congregations. We are in our second tenure in another congregation. (During our years in Christian higher education, we were members of local congregations and also served in several interim ministry roles. Our interim ministries during those years also included six churches.) In full-time ministry, we struggled with the “leave” decision and usually decided to stay. In interim ministry, the path is more easily outlined, the job to be done clearer, and the time for departure more defined.

Last year, I determined that my 62nd birthday and the possibility of early retirement later this year is the right time to step aside in favor of a younger leader. At this ‘young’ age, I feel I still possess an innovative and risk-taking spirit which loves chaos and can embrace new projects, new ideas, and new connections and challenges. (At least, this is what I tell myself!) I have tried to make clear that I am leaving “a” ministry, not “the” ministry. I want to leave this capstone ministry happily (satisfied with the work accomplished), honorably (in a way that is dignified, appreciated, and encouraging), and appropriately (no bridge burning). At the same time, I eagerly anticipate what ministry opportunities God will place before me in the future.

Knowing when to leave is one of a minister’s most difficult decisions. Leave too early, and you feel like a quitter. Stay too long and the extra time spent can become counterproductive. As I look back over my ministry, we probably left the first two congregations too soon and for the wrong reasons. Nonetheless, God blessed our immaturity and quick decisions. I believe the other congregations we have served have sensed the completeness of our ministry—after we were gone if not as we were leaving. I look back and realize that I brought to each church a set of insights, skills, and priorities that were suited for the moment. God put us in certain places “for such a time as this.” I also realize that my insights and priorities have a shelf-life, and that either I outgrow the congregation or it outgrows me. Sometimes ministers sense the moment to go prematurely—a bit worried about when someone might bring up the idea.

My full-time ministry with churches is likely coming to an end (although we admit that God could in the future open such a ministry door). I have spent time analyzing my ministry. When should a minister take the plunge into a new work? What are the “leave” signals? Here are

¹ Some thoughts in this article were suggested by ideas presented by Gordon MacDonald.

eight ideas drawn from our own ministry experience and observation of churches we have worked with in consulting and ministry placement.

The church and the minister are incompatible

This seems an obvious factor, perhaps the most obvious in the list. We have made improvements in our process of matching preachers and churches, but the system is still far from perfect. Sometimes the church needs a leadership style or skill that the minister does not possess. Sometimes the church and the preacher are at odds doctrinally or methodologically. Some preachers are visionaries who want to push ahead at a time when the church needs a pause and period of refreshment. Some preachers have their eye on so many people outside the church that they fail to meet the basic needs of those inside the church. When incompatibility exists, something has to change. In some few cases, a minister and church can adapt to each other. But generally, incompatibility means it is time to move on.

The church is “stuck” and the current ministry model is not moving it forward

Some congregations are trapped in numerous programs with little direction. All of the available energy is used to maintain what already exists. To the delight of the members, nothing much changes, and church members subtly work against new initiatives. Lip service is paid to progress, but the reality is sameness. What such a church needs is an experienced leader who can work through the unhealthy dynamics. An incoming leader with little experience and new ideas for additional programs will probably find many of his efforts neutralized, and perhaps not understand why or what has happened. “Stuck” churches are basically closed communities that do church as a way of meeting the needs of the members. Such congregations are often in rural areas and tend to be relative small, although they can be of any size. A new minister is recruited with the promise of creative church leadership and outreach opportunities, but the informal leadership style is meddling and political and the church leaders never get around to fulfilling their responsibility to provide effective shepherding and leadership in the realm of ideas. If a minister cannot help the church move “off high center” or if the church insists on staying as it is, it is time to move on.

The church develops new needs which require different ministerial skills

Organizational change and transition bring new needs. Healthy organizations grow so that new leadership styles and concepts are necessary. Some ministers cannot adapt. Church planters may develop a church to 150-200, but then find they are unable to help the church grow larger because a different skill set is needed. Churches go through stages where they need leadership development, re-visioning, a renewed identity, staff development, administrative help, management skills.... Many ministers lack the necessary skills to move the church through such stages. The minister who can admit his inability to meet the needs of the church will bless the church with his decision to leave.

Other ministry opportunities arise

This is probably the most difficult factor my wife and I have had to deal with through the years. This factor may be the trickiest of all, because it demands careful spiritual analysis and counsel. Generally, doors do not open and close simultaneously. My wife and I have

sometimes said no to the opportunity to move to another ministry because the timing was not right in our current ministry.

A few years ago, a desirable position opened and I was encouraged to apply. I did not. Later a friend expressed his surprise that my name was not among the applicants. I simply noted that I had only been in my current ministry for 2 years and that it was not time to leave, regardless of how desirable the new position.

Through the years, we have decided to stay put in our current ministry many times. However, we have also tried to understand when God was uniquely calling us to a task that was ours to accept. When such was the case, we have answered the call “unhesitatingly”.

The minister becomes stagnant

Stagnation can happen in a congregation because spiritual growth and development is not occurring, or because the church is “stuck.” An equally great challenge comes when ministers stagnate. My mind, compassionate heart, spiritual gifts, and ministry skills are my life. These have to be constantly enhanced and growing. When a congregation’s needs or context keeps the minister from personal growth, the result is mediocrity.

Some churches do not like provocative sermons. Some churches do not like theological sermons. It takes time to develop in a church a love for the Bible that deals with principles and not cute stories. I have been blessed to work with churches and elders that have put pressure on me to produce fresh sermons with insights and applications.

A number of years ago, a preaching friend and I were both contacted as potential ministerial candidates by a certain church that was looking for a pulpit minister. Both of us interviewed and declined further investigation. We saw one another at a lectureship later and discussed our reasons. My friend said, “To move to work with that church would require that I go backward in my study and thought at least 10 years to bring them along to where I am now. I don’t have that kind of time—I have to keep growing.”

Ministerial fatigue sets in

Stagnation suggests the ministry lacks a “renewal” capacity; fatigue says the minister is on continual spiritual-psychological-physical discharge. Like a car battery, the minister has to have times of recharging in order to continue to function effectively.

We left one church after almost a dozen years because we were tired and did not know how to reverse the situation. Frankly, we had said “yes” too often. We created some of the problems ourselves as we promised people more of ourselves than we were capable of delivering. We wanted to be open to everyone, including the urban community in which we lived. The result was overload, several thousand people who called me their minister, and exhaustion.

Ministers may experience fatigue because they tire of fighting the same battles repeatedly, because they become frustrated with various factors within the church with the result that it requires too much psychological energy to work through the factors.

The minister’s family

Sometimes, the minister decides to leave because of the negative impact the ministry setting is having on his family, his spouse or his children. Certainly God never intended that our

ministry harm rather than help our families. Another aspect of family that was a part of one of our leaving decisions was the need to be nearer aging parents.

The minister's age

This is the factor I am facing right now. It is not that I cannot keep up with the demands of local ministry, although that time will inevitably come. It is more the sense that a younger minister will have a unique appeal and bring a different dynamic which will be helpful at this stage in the congregation's life. It is also that God is opening doors to a host of ministry and mission opportunities that are incompatible with the need to be present in a local work with very few weeks away each year.

My decision to "leave" because of age is not typical, and I consider myself still quite young. Nonetheless, the aging minister faces the temptation to hold on too long. His love for people and their love for him are life-giving and sustaining. To surrender the task is often unthinkable.

The Bible is filled with examples of fathers blessing sons and leaders retiring. Moses, Samuel, David, and Elijah made way for successors. Jesus told his followers that it was expedient that he go away. Paul encouraged Timothy, and also taught Timothy to pass the task on to others. The time comes, and age becomes a reason to leave.

You can undoubtedly add to my list. Most ministers will have to face the "leave" decision multiple times during their ministry life. It is wise to wrestle with the principles of such decisions regularly, with self-examination and analysis of the ministry, so that the decision making process is familiar. With such regular analysis, it is likely that when it is time to leave, the church and minister can be confident that God is at work, that a good work has been done, and that both parties will be blessed by the new opportunities ahead.