What Should a Pastor Do When You Feel Like Quitting Your Church?

By

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Introduction

by Jim Fuller

Almost all pastors experience occasional times of discouragement or defeat when you feel like quitting the church you serve. There is an old joke that says that pastors think about quitting their churches every Monday morning. Jokes often reveal hidden truths.

The statistics show that the temptation to quit is more of a reality to many of our pastors. The average tenure of a senior pastor in the U.S. is around 4 to 5 years, according to many sources, even though experts say the most productive years of a pastor's ministry come during years 5 through 10.

Pastor, may I encourage you with a couple of thoughts:

- If God called you to your current ministry, please don't leave until God calls you to leave.

- When you do leave your current church, please do so for positive reasons, rather than merely to escape the trials you may be experiencing.

Easier said than done?

I get that. I have talked to thousands of pastors about the problems they are going through in their churches and ministries. I know that some churches treat their pastors very poorly. I know that some church members can be very antagonistic. As a matter of fact, that is why I started Pastoral Care Inc. in 2004, because I saw the frustration and heartache of many pastors and their families due to unreasonable and impossible expectations. I also saw the horrible damage such problems can cause, not only for our pastors, but also for our churches.

Believe me, pastor, I understand what you are going through. Nevertheless, I urge you to consider that even in the midst of hard trials, often the best thing to do is to hang in there and work through the problems.

A pastor's decision to leave a church is one of the most important decisions he or she will ever make. Your decision to leave will impact:

- The spiritual progress of people in your church who have become attached to you, including people you have led to the Lord and/or trained in discipleship.
- Your family, who will be forced to change churches and often to uproot their lives.
- The health and progress of the church as it enters an interim without a pastor and then the process of forming a new relationship with another pastor.
- Whether you successfully complete what you started, rather than leaving worthwhile programs and projects unfinished.

- Whether the good things you have accomplished will stand the test of time, rather than quickly fall by the wayside.
- Your reputation as a minister, and thus, the opportunities that will open or be closed to you in the future,

Such an important decision must never be made based on one's emotional response to the tough times that are an inevitable part of pastoral ministry.

Pastor, if you are thinking about quitting your church, please take some time to really think this through. We hope and pray that this booklet will help you during this process. Pray about it over an extended period of time. Discuss it with a trusted mentor. Do an honest self-examination on your own emotions and motivations. Do everything you can to attain a spiritual perspective on what you are going through.

Pastor, you are so important to the Kingdom of God. As always, I am available to listen and to talk. Please reach out to our ministry if you are going through a tough time at your church or need to visit with someone.

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Chapter 1

Fourteen Suggestions for Pastors Who Are Thinking About Quitting

Pastor, if you are thinking about quitting your church, please consider these 14 suggestions before you take any action.

1. Talk it over with a trusted mentor.

Confide in someone you can trust -- another pastor or church leader who understands the challenges of pastoral ministry. When we are hurting, we can sometimes develop tunnel vision about our situation. So talk it over with someone.

2. Don't talk about it with your church members.

Confiding in a spiritual mentor is one thing; venting your negative thoughts and emotions with your own church members is something entirely different. It's just not fair to put your members in that situation.

Also, if a church member violates your confidence by sharing what you have said with others, the damage may be irreparable. Your church leaders and members expect you to be leading the church in the future. How can they trust you to do so if they think your remaining days with the church are numbered?

3. Be brutally honest with yourself about the big question.

When a pastor is experiencing difficulties at one's church, the big question, of course, is: How much of the problem is actually about you, not about your church? That's a hard question to honestly think about, but doing so it may lead you to a new level in your ministry, as well as in your own spiritual life. Self-evaluation is sometimes necessary.

What are the reasons why you want to leave? What are the real reasons? Journal about it, pray about it, seek the counsel of others, know thyself.

See Chapter 3:"10 Questions to Ask Yourself Before You Quit Your Church."

Have you also got your priorities mixed up? ***God comes First, Family comes Second, and your Ministry comes Third!*** So many pastors get these all mixed up with pairing the love for God and your calling as being the same. They are totally different. You need to nurture and take care of your family before others. Your role as a pastor is important but in reality, if your family is not happy, neither will you be happy!!!

4. Seek a solution.

If you have complaints about something or somebody at your church, have you sought a solution? Why would you consider leaving before you have even made a legitimate attempt to deal with the problem?

If the issue is unreasonable expectations, have an honest discussion with your lay leaders about your job description. If the issue is a personality conflict, open up a dialogue with the person(s) involved. You may discover that an honest conversation may lead to a solution.

5. Try Listening.

If you are butting heads with some of your lay leaders or church members, consider listening to what they have to say with an open mind. If this conflict has led you to the point of considering leaving, what do you have to lose by listening or giving their ideas a try for a while?

Good leaders are willing to listen, to be open-minded, and to try new things. You might be surprised to discover that ideas from others may work out far better than you ever expected. We have also discovered that many people wanted the same results but have differences of opinions on how to accomplish these. By showing them respect and using active listening techniques, others will hopefully respond in positive ways by showing you and your leadership more respect.

6. Put your ministry on cruise control for a while.

Most pastors are leaders and change agents. However, as you have no doubt discovered, many people resistance change of any kind. It may be wise to give your people a little time to adjust to the possibility of change and implement them slowly.

If you have introduced too many new ideas and programs, your congregation may be experiencing change fatigue. Don't let that frustrate you. Be patient. You may just need to give your people time to catch up with you.

So put your ministry on cruise control for a while. Ease up on making too many changes. Instead focus on getting to know your people better. When the time is right, you can take a fresh start on leading your church to new heights.

7. Spend some time focusing on people rather than programs.

Some pastors love to interact with people, but may not be good at setting goals, making plans, and providing leadership. Some pastors are the opposite of this, having strong organizational skills but lack one-on-one skills.

If the troubles you are experiencing have to do with plans and programs, consider

backing off for a while and spend some time focusing on your people. Get to your people better. Learn about their families and their jobs. Visit them in their homes or hold receptions at the church or set up breakfast, lunch or coffee dates.

After all, the more you know about your people, the more successful you will be at leading them. And the more your people know about you, the more willing they will be to follow.

8. Take a vacation.

Have you taken a vacation in the last 12 months? You may be on the verge of uprooting your ministry and family when what you really need is to get away on vacation. A few days away can do wonders for your spiritual and emotional perspective.

If you need help planning a getaway, contact us here at Pastoral Care Inc. We can connect you with PCI Caregivers who love to provide discounted vacation services to pastors and their families.

9. Take a Sabbatical.

If you have put in a few years at the same church, you may have a feeling of being burned out. That can be expected, especially if you have not managed your time well as a pastor for personal leave. Many pastors constantly give of their time over and over again without taking time for reflection or renewal, eventually running out of all energy to continue on. Speak honest with your church leaders about your need to take off for a few weeks or even a month to seek renewal.

Pastoral Care, Inc. suggests as a rule of thumb that a church should provide its pastor a three-month sabbatical for every four years of ministry. Statistics reveal the four-year mark is a time when many churches lose their pastors. *See Chapter 2: "Why The Best Years of Pastoral Ministry Come After the First Four Years."* You will hopefully return from your sabbatical renewed and eager to start a new chapter in your pastoral ministry.

Here are three important tips about pastoral sabbaticals:

- First, a sabbatical is not a vacation. The pastor's vacation allowance should not be affected by a sabbatical.
- Secondly, the pastor should develop a sabbatical plan that aims to achieve the desired results of renewal. A sabbatical can take on many forms, but it should not be a vacation or catching up on work around the house. Possibilities could include reading, research, writing, and prayer. A short-term assignment at a Bible college or on a mission field can also be a great way to gain a refreshed attitude and perspective.
- Third, don't fill the pulpit during the sabbatical with just one preacher, and absolutely do not fill it with a preacher who is seeking a church. Line up a series of guest speakers, including qualified members from your own congregation.

Make sure you fill the pulpit in such a way that your congregation will look forward to the pastor's return.

10. Think carefully about the downside of leaving.

When things are not going well at your church, it is easy to focus on the relief you would experience by walking away. But pastor, please make sure to think about the other side of the ledger. What will you be giving up?

For one thing, if you leave too soon, you may be missing out on our ministry's most effective years. *See Chapter 2: "Why the Best Years of Pastoral Ministry Come After the First Four Years."*

Another issue is that prospective churches are going to think twice about your candidacy if your resume looks like that of a church-hopping pastor. One of the most important things a church will consider when picking a pastor is: "How long did he/she stay?" Why is this important? Because so many pastors before you may have come to their church, stirred things up or upside down, and then quickly moving on, leaving the congregation to put the pieces back together. Never improving the church!

Another thing to think about is looking at conflict/issues in a different way. "Have you ever considered this a teaching-moment for the church? By remaining at your present church, you may help them become a healthier church in the future. God calls us at churches for a reason, not due to popularity contests, but to lead, direct, and grow the people we are entrusted to.

11. Consider how your decision will impact your family.

Your spouse and children have become active members of your church family. It can be emotionally and even spiritually harmful for a pastor's family to be forcefully uprooted from one church and integrated into another. If your decision to quit means relocating to another community, the disruption is much bigger for your family: another move, a different home, different schools, and another community to get familiar with.

It is well-known that many "preacher's kids" emerge from their childhoods bruised and battered by the unique challenges of being in the pastor's family. We pastors tend to blame our churches for that, but some of the damage is inflicted by pastors themselves who quit their churches prematurely, unable to bring growth or spiritual maturity to the people within the church, and force our families to endure the consequences.

12. Pray!

This is one of the most important decisions you will ever make. Like all big decisions, it is not one to be made without much prayer over a considerable period of time.

Make a pact with God that you will meet Him on your knees every day for a month or even several months to seek His will about this life-changing decision. God is a great communicator; if you ask, wait, and listen, He will answer. Make sure to be willing to hear and do what God says.

13. Remember Your Calling.

Ask God to help you remember your calling. We pastors are human, which means we are emotional beings. But we must be diligent to not let our emotions veto what God is calling us to do. “Not my will, but Thy will be done.”

Many pastors feel a specific calling to a particular church. If God called you to your current assignment, have you completed what He wants you to do?

Above and beyond your calling to a specific church, every pastor is called to “reprove, rebuke and exhort” (2 Tim 4:2). It is our job to challenge individuals to make changes in their personal lives and to lead our churches to make continual improvements in our ministries and outreach. But it is human nature to resist change. You may face resistance but the better you are at carrying out God’s call and overcoming obstacles, the more effective you will be as a pastor.

However, experiencing resistance is not a good reason for a pastor to quit. We have been called to “admonish,” but we have also been called to do some while being “patient with everyone” (1 Thess. 5:14). Do you have the faith to patiently wait for God to work in your people’s lives, changing their hearts and breaking down their resistance?

Genuine, productive, long-lasting change takes years, not days, weeks or months. Fulfilling God’s calling and hearing Him say, “Well done, faithful servant” is worth the wait!

14. Go out on a positive note.

When you do leave, please do everything within your power to leave your church on a positive note or better than when you first arrived. The church and home settings are much more pleasant if you have manifested the fruit of the spirit during your time and especially during this transition time of leaving them.

JUST A NOTE: You have no control over how your church leaders and members choose to behave. But you are responsible for your own attitudes and actions. Right up to your last day, continue to do your work heartily and joyful unto the Lord.

Chapter 2

Why the Best Years of Pastoral Ministry Come After the First Four Years

Many experts have noted that the best years of pastoral ministry often do not kick in until the 5th through 10th years of a pastor's tenure at a church. Unfortunately more than half of pastors do not stay at a church long enough to experience those most productive years.

Church growth expert Chales Arn, writing in the "Enrichment Journal," stated about 75% of growing churches are led by pastors who had been there more than 4 years, and about 66% of declining churches are led by pastors who had been there less than 4 years. He advised pastors:

> "If you are a pastor, personally and publicly commit to staying for at least 7 years. You may get an itch to move after 3 or 4 years, but if you stay until the 6th or 7th year, you will begin to experience unsurpassed effectiveness and fruitfulness. Once you get past year 7, there is a good chance you will want to stay much longer."

There are many reasons why things get better for pastors after those first four years:

1. The initial tough stages of pastoral ministry are behind you.

There are some obvious stages of a pastor's tenure within a church. Those stages, stated simplistically, are:

- Years 1-2: ***The Honeymoon period***
- Years 2-3: ***Low-hanging fruit stage***
  It is easy to score some early victories. You lead in making some much-needed changes. You can be successful in trying some new things. Some people prefer you over the previous pastor. People are happy with the appearance of progress.
- Years 3-4: ***Reality sets in***
  You have come to recognize your church's weakness; your congregation has come to recognize your weakness. Some of the things you have tried, which worked so well at previous other churches, have failed at this church. Both the pastor and the congregation become vocal about their disappointments and expectations. Complains usually arise during this period.

When reality sets in, the pastor and church can respond in one of two ways. One way is to begin fussing and fighting. When the "storming" begins, disillusioned pastors usually decide to leave, finding another church, and start the whole process all over again.

The other choice is to stay. Tough it out! It is noteworthy to listen to people's complaints in love. This is a time to work together to identify problems, solutions, and perhaps compromises. It is also a time to show people what patience and perseverance looks like. Pastors who choose to "tough it out" can emerge from the "stormy period" to enjoy a strong position of productive ministry.

2. A higher percentage of your members are ready and willing to support your leadership.

It is reasonable for members to take a "wait and see" attitude during your first couple of years at the church. Before they invest themselves fully in you, they want to get to know you, see what kind of leader you are, and to see how long you plan to stay.

Also, the longer you stay, more of the members (newer members) are the ones who came after you did. They are your best supporters. They are the ones who consciously picked you as their pastor when they joined your church.

3. It takes time to learn what you need to know to have a successful ministry.

There are so many things for a pastor to learn about a church and a community. Every church has its own culture: its history, traditions, expectations, and politics. It takes time to get to know your people: who they are, what they are capable of, who can you count on. If you have moved into a new area, it takes time to learn the regional culture.

After a pastor has been in a church and community for a few years, he or she is no longer navigating in unfamiliar territory and their ministry becomes more successful.

Chapter 3

Ten Questions to Ask Yourself Before You Quit Your Church

In Chapter 1, we suggested that pastors who are thinking about quitting their churches should be brutally honest with themselves about what they are feeling. Here are 10 possibly painful questions to consider during the process of candid self-awareness.

1. **People Pleaser:** Are you unable to listen open-mindedly to comments and complaints from others? Are you easily moved from your convictions due to trying to please others? Do you find it unbearable when people question what you are doing as being critical?

2. **Control Freak:** Are you unhappy whenever people are not willing to do things your way. People are creatures of habit and resist change. Do you view them as adversaries?

3. **Fear of Failure:** Are you afflicted with the fear of failure? Do you tend to respond to this feeling of failure by quitting?

4. **Personality Conflict:** Is the problem about one person or small group of people? Have you taken the Biblical steps to clear up and relationship problem that is preventing an amicable resolution? Have you asked God to resolve the conflict? The same Lord who can move mountains can move people. "God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired." (1 Cor. 12:18)

5. **Patterns:** Have you experienced similar problems at other churches and in other contexts? Perhaps your ministry cannot be fully successful unless you "overcome" the same issues. Remember there is nothing wrong to disagree. It is wrong to become disagreeable.

6. **Track Record:** How long did you stay at your last church? How long at the church before that? Do you prefer the "honeymoon period" of pastoral ministry and become increasingly restless when the shine begins to fade?

7. **Bag of Tricks:** Have you tried to reproduce your favorite projects from previous churches, but this time the results have been disappointing? Are you able to accept that your current church is a different church that may require a different approach?

8. **Most Important Question:** What is God telling you to do? Do you feel God is calling you to leave the church? Has God called you to a new ministry opportunity or are you just tired and worn out? God sometimes calls people to

go but rarely calls people to leave.

9. **Hurtful Cycle:** Have you developed a bad attitude? Is your attitude affecting your ministry performance? Is it affecting how people you respond to you? Has your attitude become a self-fulfilling prophecy?

10. **Unfinished Business:** Did God send you to this church to do something and has that been finished yet? Pastors often leave based upon emotions, not direction from the Lord, whether their mission was accomplished or not or even make decisions based on common sense.

    If you are motivated by emotions or common sense, I would advise you to try the Ben Franklin method for making a decision. Ben Franklin often made his decisions from placing a plus sign on the left hand side of a paper and a minus sign on the right side of the paper. He would place a topic or decision that needs to be made at the top of the page and then he would list all the positives and negatives of that on each side. He would then make a decision based upon the input placed the page.

    NOTE: This is only a carnal way of determining which way may be best for each decision. The church and your calling are not determined by carnal thinking. ***Spiritual guidance*** comes from above and is more important than our own limited thinking!!! In most cases, when I have suggested this approach, pastors have noted there were more positives to stay than to leave. This is just a tool.

Chapter 4

It Is Not Always Wrong To Go

Most of what is written about a pastor's tenure at church, including most of the content of this book, is based on the belief that many pastors leave their churches too early and often for the wrong reasons.

However, we do not want to imply that it is always wrong for a pastor to leave one's church. To the contrary, as Solomon said, there is a time for everything. After all, in the Scriptures, God far more often calls people to "go" somewhere new than to "stay" where they are.

Consider these:

- If you have prayed with a listening heart over an extended period of time for direction for your ministry and life, and you believe God is releasing you to move on to another church, then it may be time to go.

- One can only learn so much in the classroom at Bible college or seminary. The really of learning begins out in the field, working with real churches. It can be a good thing for young pastors to gain experience from more than one setting or church before settling down for an extended ministry. We learn from both the positives and negatives in life.

- If you believe your church and your ministry is stuck in a rut, and you have faithfully tried everything you know to do to move things forward, with little or no success, maybe it is time for you to seek another church or direction in your life.

- Maybe another pastor with a different skill set is needed to lead your church to the next level. The story of one planting, the other one watering, and the other one gathering the harvest is the perfect example. Maybe your ministry is exactly what another church needs at their stage in its progress.

- Just as there are poor reasons to leave, there are also many poor reasons to stay. Are you inflexible? Afraid of Change? Satisfied where you are now and perhaps not listening to anything new from the Lord? Is your church paying such a generous salary that you have become financially trapped, even to the point a move might be exactly what your ministry needs?

Chapter 5

A Practice That Has Saved Me Much Grief Over the Years

By Terry Hull, Communications Director at Pastoral Care, Inc.

My wife Norma and I have served many churches in Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico for almost 30 years. We have taken on all kinds of assignments: a church plant and a church that was more than 100 years old; rural and urban churches; bi-vocational and full time ministries.

Like all pastors, we encountered times at each of those churches about moving on. In order to seek God's will and follow His lead, we developed the following strategy:

1. Whenever we have been discouraged or frustrated about a ministry, we have discussed it openly with each other. We have always made the decision together both to go to a church or when to leave.

2. Whenever we found both of us were beginning to think about leaving a church, we would mark a date in the future, at least 6 months out, often a year out. During that time, we would avoid talking too often or too much about leaving. Instead, we would pray for God to show us His will in no uncertain terms.

3. During that extended time of prayer, we would renew our commitment to keep the most positive attitude possible and work as hard as we can, unto the Lord rather than men. Otherwise, we would simply be contributing to the problem, rather than giving the Lord time to address the problem in His sovereign way.

Chapter 6

Wise Words About . . .*Quitting Your Church*

- God rewards perseverance. James 1:12: “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”

- “Long tenure is one of the key requisites for churches to move from mediocrity to goodness to greatness.” (Thom Rainer, Lifeway Research; “Breakout Churches”)

- God wants us to stay positive. Galatians 6:9-10: “Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.”

- “Lead as if you’ll be there forever.” (Dr. Roger Parrott, president, Bellhaven University; “The Longview: Lasting Strategies for Rising Leaders”)

- Colossians 3:22-24: “Not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.”

- Perseverance builds our spiritual character. Romans 5:3-4: “We also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope.”

- God is guiding our ministries. Acts 16:6-10: “They passed through Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”

- Colossians 3:22-24: “Not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.”

- Ephesians 6: 6-8: “Not by the way of eye service, as men pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. With good will render service, as to the

Lord, and not to men, knowing whatever good thing each does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free."

The Longest Pastoral Ministry In U.S. History

THIS IS FROM WIKIPEDIA: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laban_Ainsworth

Laban Ainsworth (July 19, 1757-March 17, 1858) was an American clergyman and pastor. He holds the record for the longest serving pastorate in American history. He served as a pastor in Jaffrey, New Hampshire from 1782 to 1858, a period of 76 years. Ainsworth was also adept at writing hymnals.