

## 5 Rather Startling Reasons People Leave Your Church

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No matter how long you've been in leadership, it still hurts when people leave your church.

It's somewhat easy to understand people leaving when things are going poorly— when there's conflict, division or dysfunction. But what most leaders aren't prepared for is the reality that people will leave when things are going well. Even when they're going really well. In fact, some people leave because things are going well, or because you're getting healthier.

As surprising as this sounds, **every time you make progress as a church, you'll lose people.**

This comes as a shock to most leaders. And it can be very disheartening, especially if you don't realize some loss even in great seasons is 'normal'.

So why do people leave even when you're making progress at your church? Simple. The people who are at your church today are there because they like it the way it is. Change that (even for the better), and some will leave.

It will shock you. It will disappoint you. It will leave you scratching your head. And it's unavoidable. But you need to keep moving or else you'll be paralyzed by focusing on who you want to keep, not who you want to reach.

So why do people leave when things are going well?

Here are 5 rather startling reasons people leave your church when you're least expecting it.

### 1. You Cast Too Big A Vision

What? Casting a big vision can cause people to leave? Absolutely. A big vision is inspiring. It's also threatening.

Vision threatens people because, inherently, vision challenges the status quo. It calls out the best in people. It asks people to think bigger, to think beyond themselves, to push past the status quo and to sacrifice. And not everybody's up for that.

As a leader, it's critical to sift through your motivation every time you cast vision. If the vision is really about you, your ego, or your insecurities (you need to grow bigger to feel good about yourself), healthy people will resist it. (Wise, godly people can help you sort through your motives and see them accurately.) But you can have a beautifully motivated, compelling vision and still have people walk out the door.

As exciting as the future is, some people prefer the present. Others live in the past. You can't build the future church on people who live in the past.

## 2. You Grew

Growth can be an awesome thing. Healthy growth means you're reaching new people, baptizing people and seeing hope beat in the hearts of people who never knew hope, and so much more.

But growth is threatening.  
You'll see a few patterns emerge.

First, people who love being a big fish in a small pond will immediately get uncomfortable. They'll want more say...more power, more control.

Others won't be comfortable with the crowds or the parking issues or having to wait in lines when they were used to accessing everything instantly. And you'll probably hear vague comments like "it's just not the same anymore" or "we simply like it better when it was smaller." So what do you do with that?

Well, first, empathize. They're right...things have changed and it's not the same as it used to be.

Second, ask them to invite their friends and get in on what's going on.

What you'll likely discover is that some do, but most (or at least many) don't. And for them, it might all boil down to this: the church isn't really about accomplishing a mission. It's about meeting their needs. The challenge, of course, is that the heart of the Christian faith isn't about satisfying yourself, it's about dying to yourself.

So what do you do?

If you're going to make progress on your mission, focus on who you want to reach, not who you want to keep. The moment you focus on who you're trying to keep, both the present and the future slip away from you.

## 3. You're Reaching Different People

As a church realizes its mission, it means that you'll reach your community, which when fully realized, means you'll have a cross-section of your entire community.

Rich and poor.  
Professional and blue collar.  
Republicans and Democrats.  
Black and white.  
Latino and Asian.

It means you'll have people in your church who are sober, and others who are working on it, and others still whose addictions are far from under control.

Which is exactly what the church should be. The New Testament church was all those things. If you're not convinced it was, please re-read 1 Corinthians.

This can be really threatening for people who think church is for the righteous and for people who have all their issues worked out, which of course, is none of us.

Tim Keller gets to the heart of the problem with modern Christianity in recounting this conversation he had with a woman about her self-righteous faith:

I asked her what was so scary about unmerited free grace? She replied something like this: "If I was saved by my good works — then there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through.

I would be like a taxpayer with rights. I would have done my duty and now I would deserve a certain quality of life. But if it is really true that I am a sinner saved by sheer grace — at God's infinite cost — then there's nothing he cannot ask of me. (Tim Keller, [Prodigal God](#))

If everyone in your church looks like you, acts like you, votes like you, believes like you and thinks like you, you're probably not the church.

#### **4. You Got Healthier**

When I look back at over two decades of leadership, I realize that so much of my journey has been toward greater and greater emotional and spiritual health.

I've seen counselors over the years, hired coaches, read books, gone on retreats and done whatever I can to become more emotionally, spiritually and relationally healthy. And like every leader, I'm a work in progress.

But here's the good news. Leaders, when you get healthier, your church gets healthier.

But it also means that sometimes, people who don't want to get healthy leave.

In the same way that healthy people are drawn to healthy leaders, unhealthy people are drawn to unhealthy leaders.

Gossipers love other gossipers.

Troublemakers love other troublemakers.

Selfish people feel better around other selfish people. You get the picture.

As your church gets healthier, unhealthy people really have two options: get healthy, or find a less healthy environment.

It's quite possible that the vast majority of your church will get healthier with you, particularly if you lead and teach out of what you're learning. But some won't want to make that journey. They'll leave. And sometimes they make a scene when they go.

**Let them go. That's what healthy people do...**they invite, they encourage, and when refused, they move on. So...keep moving your church toward health.

## 5. You Finally Moved Into That New Facility

So many people think a move into a new building is a positive step that will only cause growth.

For a church that has momentum, that's almost universally true. (Although a move into a building will not cause a declining church to grow.)

But even when things are going well, you will lose people. Some people will love the portable days even better. Some won't like the new location. Others may not like the design. Others may feel displaced. For some people, there's also a sentimental association with past places of worship as well. Maybe the sentiment is because they became Christians there, were baptized there, or even got married there. For sure, that's understandable. Most people get past the sentiment, but some don't. And they'll leave.

The church has to keep moving though...advancing the mission. After all, you cannot build a future by living in the past.

### Why Does This Matter?

All of this can leave you feeling discouraged unless you realize one core truth. Even if the handful of people who might leave aren't unappeasable, the people you need to reach are far greater in number than those you're trying to keep.

The people you might lose always have other churches they can go to. The unchurched people you will reach by changing...don't.

Don't burn bridges with those leaving (be gracious...thank them for their time with you), but don't sacrifice the mission for the sake of a handful of people who don't like the future. The challenge, of course, is to reach more people than you lose and to keep unnecessary departures to a minimum.

I hope this post comes as encouragement to you. Just know if, despite your best efforts, you still see a small group walk out the door, you're not alone.

Keep making progress. Keep leading. Keep pursuing your mission.

If you're leading well, who you reach will be greater than who you lose, even if in some moments it doesn't seem that way.