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**WHEN MEMBERS LEAVE: HOW PASTORS CAN GUARD THEIR HEARTS**

**December 7, 2021 – Phil A. Newton**

After the presbytery of local pastors interviewed me for ordination, each member offered a word of counsel. Always preach the Word. Be a holy man. Someone else told me, “Don’t get close to your people.” While no one corrected him, the Holy Spirit set off alarm bells in my heart. His comment exposed his own raw nerves and wounds that cut deeply into his life, leaving him cynical about pastoral ministry. At the time, I was young, a long way from spiritual maturity, and hadn’t served as a lead pastor. But I knew I couldn’t shepherd people without having them in my heart.

One paradigm will not fit every church-and-pastor relationship. Personalities, interests, and styles, coupled with doctrine, methods, and change, sometimes unsettle the church atmosphere. Yet the Lord gives the appropriate prescription for each. It’s found in the ample “one another” passages, reminding us of the battle to maintain harmony and faithfulness in the local church. We’re all called to faithfully love, accept, encourage, and show kindness to one another ([John 13:35](https://www.esv.org/verses/John%2013%3A35/); [Rom. 15:7](https://www.esv.org/verses/Rom.%2015%3A7/); [1 Thess. 5:11](https://www.esv.org/verses/1%20Thess.%205%3A11/); [Eph. 4:32](https://www.esv.org/verses/Eph.%204%3A32/)).

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Amid this, the Devil throws strained attitudes, [disharmony](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/church-dont-let-coronavirus-divide/), apathy, discontent, and a host of fiery darts ([Eph. 6:10–20](https://www.esv.org/verses/Eph.%206%3A10%E2%80%9320/)). Add the world’s influence, social media’s massive footprint among members to foment greener-pasture sentiments, low views of the church, even lower views of pastoral ministry, and the [dangerous substitution of “online church,”](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/cant-livestream-church/) and a recipe for discouragement is served. In this kind of atmosphere, Jesus Christ calls pastors to shepherd the flock ([Acts 20:28](https://www.esv.org/verses/Acts%2020%3A28/); [1 Pet. 5:2](https://www.esv.org/verses/1%20Pet.%205%3A2/)). He added no caveats to “shepherd.”

Over the years, I’ve experienced painful times of members departing. Some disagreed theologically. Others left simply because a friend left. Some preferred other churches’ ministries. Still others changed jobs and relocated elsewhere. Whatever the reason, people I loved and served, whose fellowship I enjoyed, with whom I had laughed and cried, left. At times they left in rapid succession; other times a dribble here and there. How could I keep giving my heart to people who might not stay?

**Regain Equilibrium**

When members leave, it’s easy to feel you’ve been spun in a centrifuge. You’re dizzy, wondering, hurting, at a loss. Yet Jesus called you to shepherd the flock he purchased by his own blood ([Acts 20:28](https://www.esv.org/verses/Acts%2020%3A28/)). Shepherding calls for close contact, ground-level exposure to the flock. You cannot shepherd them without being close to them. Yet being close to them may mean being hurt once again. Vulnerability accompanies pastoral ministry. Yes, you will be hurt—again. Sometimes it’s your closest friends who abandon you—I know about that personally and so does Jesus.

**How could I keep giving my heart to pastor people who may not stay?**

How do you regain equilibrium? When the seventy put their joy in ministry success, Jesus told them not to rejoice in it, “but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” Find your joy in Jesus, not in your ministry ([Luke 10:17–20](https://www.esv.org/verses/Luke%2010%3A17%E2%80%9320/)). If your joy is fixed on him, then even fickleness in the flock, although hurtful, will not daunt your courage to continue pastoring those under your charge. Keep your heart warmed on him.

**It’s the Lord’s Ministry; Don’t Lose Heart**

While we often use the personal pronoun “my” to refer to our ministries, they really belong to our Lord. Although Paul witnessed the pain of departures and opposition, he also spoke of ministry as being received from the Lord. He didn’t create it. Jesus did. For that reason, he could write, “We do not lose heart” ([2 Cor. 4:1–6](https://www.esv.org/verses/2%20Cor.%204%3A1%E2%80%936/)).

He did not lose heart because, despite difficulties and struggles, he knew God finds pleasure in the preaching of Jesus Christ’s gospel. In other words, Paul realized (maybe he struggled to reach this point) that ministry was not about him or his performance or even his comfort. It was about preaching Christ faithfully, then relying on the Lord to work and accomplish his redemptive purposes.

But what happens when some who’ve received the Word through our ministries leave? It may be through painful exits of those we’ve loved and invested our lives in that the Lord has a work to accomplish in us.

One rash of departures showed me how much I wanted the congregation’s approval instead of the Lord’s. I needed that radical, inward change in disposition to endure long term in ministry. He may deepen dependence on him. He may teach us to love unconditionally. He may strip away vestiges of self-importance we didn’t realize lurked under the surface. He may order suffering so that we more faithfully empathize with those we shepherd.

It’s his ministry. Don’t lose heart. The Good Shepherd knows you.

**Serve the Flock Entrusted to You**

The remaining members who didn’t leave need your attentive shepherding. You can become easily distracted by departures. Your mind can become paralyzed, absorbed with those who left, and unconsciously miss out on the joy of pastoring. The congregation suffers, too, from a less-than-focused pastor. When the multitudes left, Jesus did not blink ([John 6](https://www.esv.org/verses/John%206/)). Even some numbered as his disciples left, grumbling in the process. Jesus relied on the Father’s sovereign purposes, even in the departures ([John 6:65](https://www.esv.org/verses/John%206%3A65/)). Without hesitation or complaint, he kept shepherding those who remained.

**A rash of departures showed me how much I wanted the congregation’s approval instead of the Lord’s.**

I don’t minimize the pain of people leaving the church. Years ago, during a three-year period about 65 percent of our congregation left. It was hard. But I learned good lessons, and out of it, grew closer to those who remained. We picked up the pieces and moved ahead, much stronger in Christ, humbler about ministry, and more confident in the wise providence of the Lord. I learned to keep pastoring, keep giving myself to others in service, and keep trusting the Lord with the pains along the way.

**Overlook Offenses**

Just as we encourage our congregation members to be quick to overlook offenses, we must overlook them too ([Prov. 19:11](https://www.esv.org/verses/Prov.%2019%3A11/)). Bitterness over those wounding you—intentionally or not—will only intensify. Instead, in love, you can cover the sins done to you ([1 Pet. 4:8](https://www.esv.org/verses/1%20Pet.%204%3A8/)). As you do so, pray—not with imprecatory pleas but with grace.

I grew close to a brother who, along with his family, attended our church the day we began. He became a leader, encourager, and friend. He was the first church member to visit the hospital right after our fourth child’s birth. One day he came in to tell me he was leaving. His reason: “You know I like to be around successful things; and this is not successful. I’m leaving.”

That was it. Ten years brushed off in a moment. God gave me the grace to forgive him and keep praying for him. In subsequent years, I’ve had opportunities to minister to his family. He’s reached out to encourage me. He had no biblical reason to leave. But he did. With that, I learned not to dwell on the past but press on with grace and kindness.

None of these practices comes naturally. Instead, they overflow from learning to find our deepest satisfaction in Jesus. While much joy can be found in serving our church members, he far exceeds what a church member can give us. We can easily expect more from them than God intends us to receive.

Shepherd the flock. Keep them in your heart. All the while, find that Jesus is enough.

**This article was originally published on The Gospel Coalition website and is used with permission. The original can be found here:** [**https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/when-members-leave/.**](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/when-members-leave/)