

Five Ways to Amaze People Who Leave Your Church

A few days ago, a woman told me a heart-breaking story about her pastor.

Cindy was born and raised at First Church, and Pastor Smith's teaching had laid the foundation for her faith (all names changed). He had been like a second father to Cindy, gently guiding her through many of the struggles of her youth and young adulthood.



When Cindy married Marc, they continued to worship at First Church. As they studied the Bible more deeply, however, some of their beliefs began to change. They held true to all of the core principles Pastor Smith taught, but they felt increasingly misaligned with some of the church's secondary doctrines and ministry priorities.

They met with Pastor Smith several times to discuss their concerns, but the more they talked, the more strained those conversations became.

Finally, after two years of study and prayer, they decided they could live out their faith more effectively at another church in their community. When they met with Pastor Smith to share their decision, he said he was deeply disappointed in them. Abruptly rising from his chair, he walked them to the door and said goodbye.

It only got worse from there.

Every time Cindy and Marc encountered Pastor Smith in their community, they got a cold shoulder. In most cases, he would simply turn away before they were close enough to speak. If they were too close to ignore and managed to say hello, he gave them a one-word response and walked past them as quickly as possible.

Leaving a Church Is a Type of Rejection

When Cindy shared this story with me, I could easily understand why she was so deeply hurt by Pastor Smith's behavior. At the same time, it was not hard to understand why he was acting as he was.

When someone leaves a church, even for valid reasons, it's natural for a pastor to feel some level of personal rejection ... that people have found something wanting in his preaching, pastoral care or leadership.

Some pastors manage these emotions constructively, but others, like Pastor Smith, react poorly.

Having felt rejected, they reject right back. They put up a defensive wall to conceal their pain. They keep their distance so they can't be rejected again. And if they are honest, some would have to admit that they actually want to hurt those who have hurt them.

Of course, it's not only pastors who give in to these feelings. Other members of a church can also feel rejected when people leave, which may lead them to behave the same way that Cindy's pastor did.

The Way of Amazing Grace

There is a better way to treat people who leave a church, whether you're a pastor or a fellow church member. It's the way of grace, better yet, the way of amazing grace. Here is what it can look like.

Be approachable. Ask God to transform your character and relational skills so that people feel safe coming to you with concerns about your church, even if they involve changing views on theology, questions that may expose weak spots in your leadership, or specific criticism of current practices. If you develop a reputation for welcoming such discussions with humility and gentleness, people will be inclined to come to you earlier, before positions are hardened or resentments build. [*2 Timothy 2:24-25 – And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth,...*] When minds are still open on both sides, there is a better chance for understanding, helpful change and preserved relationships. [*See Approachability: The Passport to Real Ministry and Leadership, at rw360.org under Resources, RW Blogs.*]

Empathize. Resist the inclination to immediately correct or debate others' concerns. Instead, make a sincere effort to understand what they are experiencing, feeling and thinking. Ask God to help you put yourself in their shoes and see things from their perspective. [*1 Peter 3:8 – Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.*] As you gain better insights into their concerns and affirm things you agree with, you'll build trust and encourage openness. You will also be better positioned to find ways to meet their legitimate interests, whether they stay in your church or not. [*Phil. 2:3-4 – Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*] [*see Seven Steps to Empathy, at rw360.org under Resources, RW Blogs.*]

Offer to help people find a good church. If it becomes evident that a change of churches is inevitable, amaze people by offering to help them find the church in your community that best fits their needs. (A good shepherd doesn't simply open the gate and let a sheep wander away; he walks with that sheep to make sure it finds a good new shepherd and a safe fold!) Then go the extra mile and call that new shepherd to commend your former members to him. That is amazing grace!

Greet former members warmly. After people leave your church, pray that God will give you opportunities to encounter them during the week. When you see them, go to them, greet them warmly, ask how they are doing, and be genuinely glad for how God is blessing them in their new church. As Romans 15:7 teaches, "Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

Follow up. Finally, program your phone or computer to remind you to call people 30, 60 and 90 days after they leave your church to find out how they are doing. Ask whether they are feeling comfortable with their new church, how God is working in their lives, and what their children are up to. Tell them you miss them but are glad to hear that God is blessing them in their new church family. Rejoice in the fact that you are still part of the family of God and invite them to call you if they ever need something.

The Benefits of Responding with Grace

This grace-based approach toward former church members (or anyone who has pulled away from you in some other way) has multiple benefits.

First, by actively loving and blessing others, you will guard our own heart from resentment and bitterness.

Second, you will protect others from guilt and free them to give themselves fully to serving the Lord in their new church family.

Third, by not allowing bridges to be burned, you will leave the way open for people to return if their change of churches doesn't work out as they had hoped.

Fourth, and most importantly, you will honor God by loving others as he has loved you. Just think of all the times you've moved away from God some way. Has he cut you off? Given you the cold shoulder? No. Like the father of the prodigal son, his arms are always open wide. *[Luke 15:20 – He arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.]* As you imitate his gracious refusal to turn away from you even when you've turned away from him, you will display his character and bring glory to his name.

– Ken Sande

Reflection Questions

How do you feel toward people who leave your church (or pull away from you in some other way)? How do you think, talk about and behave toward them?

Does your response to rejection mirror how most people behave, or does it reflect God's patience and love toward you?

How could a grace-based response to people who leave a church (or reject you in any other way) encourage other believers to grow in Christ and open doors for sharing the gospel with those who do not yet trust in him?

Are there people who have pulled away from your church or you personally who you have counter-rejected? How do you think they would respond if you went to them, asked for forgiveness and sought to live out the principles described above? How do you think God would view such an effort? *[Eph. 5:8-10 – for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.]* *[Matt. 25:21 – His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.']*

Now, don't just think about this; do it today!

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