

There's a Right Way and a Wrong Way to Leave a Church

by [J. Lee Grady](#) | Aug 3, 2022 | [Fire in My Bones](#)



This pandemic season hasn't been easy—but pastors have suffered in unique ways. Statistics show that between 20-30% of churchgoers stopped attending in 2020, and the bulk of those people have not returned. In many cases, they never said goodbye.

Many of my best friends are pastors, and they have told me many sad accounts of how their church members left—both before and during the pandemic. I took a random poll this week to hear how exiting members behaved when they went out the back door:

Pastor “Bob”: “One of my members left the church, and then he told me it was because the air conditioning in the church was too cold.”

Pastor “Rick”: “One family left my church, but before leaving they actually threatened to inflict bodily harm on me because I didn't do enough to help their son who was on drugs.”

Pastor “Stan”: “One of my members came to my house and told me I was leading the teens to hell because I allowed them to hear Christian rap music. Then she left the church.”

Pastor “Brenda”: “A disgruntled member who left the church still had a key. This person then let himself into the building and released a bunch of snakes. It took a week to get rid of them!”

Pastor “Doyle”: A man left our church right after we allowed a group of Hispanic believers to use our building. This man said he was leaving because Hispanics were ‘taking over everything!’”

Pastor “Mike”: “Most of the time when someone leaves, they never say anything. I would rather them tell me directly what their issue is.”

People come and people go. Pastors know this, and they try to learn to cope with the pain. Pastors will certainly feel rejected when people leave, even when God is leading those people to make an exit. But if you sense the Holy Spirit is directing you to leave a church, please do it the right way. Here are a few guidelines:

- 1. Don’t leave mad.** If you are leaving because you are angry at a pastor or another member, you are proving your immaturity. Offense is never justifiable. Jesus told us to go to the person who offends us (Matt. 18:15). And Proverbs 19:11 says: “The discretion of a man defers his anger, and it is his glory to pass over a transgression.” If you break a relationship every time you are offended, you will never grow up. Even if you are called to leave a church, you should never hold a grudge. Have the courage to face your offense and disarm it.
- 2. Don’t make threats.** Some people get so angry they want to hurt the church when they leave. They want the pastor to suffer. One man told a friend of mine that he hoped the church would go bankrupt after he stopped tithing to it. (Instead, God sent other people whose donations more than covered the lost income.) Romans 12:19 says, “Beloved, do not avenge yourselves.” Even if a pastor or church members are doing inappropriate things, it’s not your job to punish them.
- 3. Don’t leave secretly.** When I was a boy, my mother taught me to say: “I enjoyed my meal. May I be excused?” when I finished eating. I wasn’t allowed to leave the table without this announcement. A similar rule applies to leaving a church. It’s rude to walk out with no explanation. Your pastor deserves to know why. You can write a letter, but it’s better to say it in person—and to include some words of thanks for the way the church has helped you in the past.
- 4. Don’t talk about your exit on social media.** Proverbs 6:19 says God hates the one who “sows discord among brethren.” Those are strong words! Some people actually think they are doing God’s work by badmouthing a pastor, but they are digging a ditch that they will soon fall into. Keep your judgments to yourself. Posting a rant on Instagram only shows how petty and self-centered you are.
- 5. Don’t leave and try to take others with you.** If God is calling you to switch churches, that’s fine. God will bless your transition if you do it in a healthy way. But if you try to stage a massive walkout, you are undermining God’s authority. Don’t allow the enemy to use you as an agent of division.

- 6. Don't leave and stay away from church altogether.** I've often heard people say God led them to leave a church to go elsewhere. But then I find out after three years that "elsewhere" meant nowhere! This is usually a sign of either deep disappointment or an unresolved conflict. You should never, ever give up on church. It is God's family. No Christian should live in isolation.

Obviously, there are times when we must leave a church. It happens because of job transfers, family issues, ministry preferences, driving distance and many other reasons. And some churches have unresolved problems that make them unhealthy—and God does not require us to stay there.

The Holy Spirit is the one who directs us to the right congregation.

Good pastors know they can't hold onto people possessively. Healthy churches remind people that the exit door is unlocked, and that members are free to go as the Holy Spirit leads.

Deuteronomy 28:6 says: "You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out." Pastors should bless people who leave—but members should leave in a respectful way that invites that blessing.

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