

Leaving and grieving

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [November 14, 2012](#) issue



The pulpit at Shadyside Presbyterian in Pittsburgh. [Some rights reserved](#) by [shadysidelantern](#).

I just announced that I'll be leaving the church I serve as a pastor because I have accepted another position. There's a lot of shock and dismay. Some are angry. This is the third time I've said goodbye to a congregation. I should know how to do it by now, but I'm still overwhelmed by the emotional awkwardness of the breakup. I keep telling my parishioners, "It's not you. It's me."

I have always resisted analogies that depict the pastor-congregation relationship as if it were a marriage. We pastors commit ourselves to serve the church, but our lifelong vow is to Jesus Christ. If we believe that Jesus is inviting us to work in another part of his kingdom, we have to go.

The problem is that the discernment process for making a move typically ignores the church where the pastor is currently serving. Search committees meet secretly with their candidates in order to maintain confidentiality and not jeopardize the parish relationships of those who are not chosen. But that means the chosen pastor startles the congregation with the decision to leave it. The search committee gets a vote, the pastor gets a vote, sometimes a bishop gets a vote—but the people who are left behind only get to grieve.

As I wade through their highly charged emotions I keep reminding myself they just received the news while I had eight months to prayerfully make my way through the decision-making process. Some of that was done with a search committee. Some of it was done through late-night conversations with my wife, when we sorted through the gut-wrenching thought of leaving a church we love. And where we are very happy.

All of these should place me way ahead of the congregation in working through the grief. But it doesn't. Every time I have another conversation, open another e-mail or stand at the door following worship, the now-familiar knot returns to my stomach.

A lot will change in the congregation and for my family. At church the staffing patterns will change, new program ideas will go on hold, the budget may take a hit and the congregation will enter its own discernment process during an interim that will take over a year. At home the issues are focused more on teenagers who have to change high schools and the loss of a community in which my wife has nurtured deep relationships. There's plenty of opportunity for me to feel guilt.

I am tempted to hide by throwing myself into the details of lining up meetings with the officers, following our detailed polity for "dissolving the pastoral relationship," working out the terms of my arrival at the new place or editing a letter to the church that has to say, "I love you. And I am leaving you."

Grief and anger are not the worst responses to the news that a pastor is leaving. I'm glad my congregation isn't relieved. Beneath the dismay lies the subtext of appreciation for what is being lost, but it falls to me as the pastor to dig through their disappointment to find this affirmation. That's hard emotional work when I'm using most of my energy to outrun the guilt.

If I tell the congregation I believe I am "called" to another place, they often cock their heads like confused dogs. It takes a lot of courage to challenge pastors when

we use this theological language, so most church members don't attempt it. But I know them well. They are wondering if I'm not using pastor-talk to cloak myself in an excuse for simply getting a better job.

They may be onto something. Those of us who cherish the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers claim that the calling of a pastor is not all that different from the calling of the butcher, baker or candlestick maker. We are all called to a vocation of participating in the mission of Jesus Christ on earth regardless of our jobs. I've had several jobs as a pastor and professor, but only one call to be a disciple.

Still, I believe in the process of sitting at a table with others and prayerfully trying to figure out what God is calling us to do at this moment. So I try to explain about the process, telling them that I doing the best I can to figure out what God is asking of me. For now I am clear that God is asking me to help my church grieve through all the swirling emotions.

They will get over my departure, just as they have gotten over the departures of all the pastors who left before me. New members will come who've never heard of me. Another pastor will arrive and offer gifts and holy visions I do not have. Our family will, in time, call the new place home. But no one wants to hear about that now.

For everything there is a season, and this is the season for weeping our way through goodbye.