

# A Minister's Transition Kit



4 Ways To *Leave* a Church Well  
7 Ways to Guide Children *Gracefully*  
How to *Enter* a Church Well



# HOW TO LEAVE A CHURCH WELL

By Jeff Helton



# STUDY THE HEART

To leave a church well, both as a minister and a family, you must start with the internal belief that God redeems everything. God takes both the beautiful accomplishments and the garbage of your life, to grow you and use it for His glory.

As ministers and followers of Christ, we must decide if the worst moments--whether it is a mistake or an unfortunate or hurtful situation--can be used by God in His ultimate work. Before you leave a church position, ask, *"Okay God, can I trust that you're bigger than what's happened?"*

One of the great sorrows in ministry is the number of pastors and ministers who leave their Church angry. They exit their church position with a story that speaks of how the system has victimized them.

Please don't misunderstand. There are situations in which pastors or ministers are hurt, harmed, victimized, and tormented by congregants,

boards, or other staff members. Even in those situations, it's imperative in your inner heart world, that you can trust God to be bigger than the current circumstance. He is up to something, and His love cannot be thwarted by what you have just endured.

In those difficult moments, it is good to pause and gain an eternal perspective. The old camp meeting song of my southeast Tennessee youth says, "This world is not my home. I'm just a passing through it." I love those lyrics, and it reminds me there is something bigger going on than my involvement in a difficult situation.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we put on rose-colored glasses or assume a Pollyanna mentality. I'm talking about embracing the eternal reality that God is genuinely redeeming in character, and He is up to something in your life and the lives of your loved ones.

# SPEAK WISELY




Leaving a church position requires you, as a minister, to speak the truth. However, speaking the truth in *concentric circles* is critical. In other words, talk about the facts only where it applies.

There was a situation in a previous Church when I chose to leave because of some discord with a group of fellow leaders, called elders within our Church culture. I met with them to share how I saw the situation and my perception of their understanding of the situation. It resulted in an impasse. Because we were unable to agree on the circumstance, it was time for me to leave.

I intentionally spoke the truth in regards to their decision. They respectfully understood it and heard it, but it was still time for me to move on. I practiced honesty within the circle in which it applied.

When it was time to speak to the whole Church body--who had not been part of those conversations-- I chose not to speak out. I believed that talking to the entire Church would only create more discord rather than promote health. The situation was not about illegal or unethical behavior, but rather about preferred behavior.

Preferential behavior triggers a lot of departures by a boss or an employee. When the discord or conflict is preferential, such as a change in the style of worship or change in direction by the leadership, be very direct with those whom you have had discussions. However, when addressing the Church body, continue to shepherd as you leave and speak in broader generalities to eliminate any possibility for discord.



# SEPARATE THE ISSUES

One wise component of leaving well is to discern the difference between **WHY** you are leaving versus **WHO** you are leaving. Often, ministers or pastors combine these two issues.

When you can't separate the issues, you can leave and feel mad at the other person and entertain thoughts such as, *"I can't believe he or she did this to me."*

A better way of thinking through the situation is to say, *"He or she is in the new leadership role. They want to go a different direction with student ministry, which is their prerogative."*

So often, I see a new pastor or staff member come to town and change the philosophy of ministry. The other staff members have an old way of doing activities or events, so the new leadership no longer fits. The temptation is to personalize the change and believe there's something defective about you.

I regularly use a metaphor with my clients. As a staff member, you are like a wide receiver for a football team. You are an outstanding wide receiver, and you make a difference in your role on the Church team.

Then a new senior pastor comes in (or a new boss) and announces, *"Hey, I don't really like football. I don't think football is the most effective way for us to be the Church. I'm going to go play baseball."*

Suddenly, if you're not careful, you become the guy standing in right field wearing shoulder pads and a football helmet. At some point, you must realize that the culture and philosophy of ministry has shifted, and you no longer fit. Football is still a good sport, but you need to go to another church if you want to continue playing.

When you have that kind of broader perspective, you can leave and understand, *"Hey, there's no longer a fit for me in this place."*

# STAY STEADY



When you transition churches, you have to be confident in what God has called you to in ministry. This belief is foundational. For example, God may have called you to ministry in a particular city and state for a season.

Now, for whatever reason, the situation has changed. And although the location or home address may have changed, the calling didn't change. It evolved.

When you can differentiate between the two and embrace that difference, you can stay faithful to your overall calling, which helps you leave a church well.

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# TRANSITIONING CHURCHES:

7 Ways To  
Guide

Children Gracefully



By Lora Helton



# Before the Transition

## 1 Age-Appropriate Communication

Children process information differently at different ages. When you are considering leaving a church, it is vital to share information in age-appropriate detail and language. The older your children, the more information they will want and need. It is very important to pray for discernment and wisdom as you navigate necessary conversations. Communication helps your kids prepare and plan for leaving, which also helps them with the transition.

## 2 Specific Communication

Sometimes the decision to leave a church is rooted in general ideas, such as the feeling that God is transitioning your family into a new season. If that is the case, keep in mind that it may be harder for kids to understand. In other cases, there are specific reasons for leaving a church. As you transition, keep the discussion limited to the particular issues. For example, if the change is related to theology, explain in age-appropriate ways what you believe and why you feel led to seek a new church home.

Unfortunately, sometimes leaving is hurtful and personal. In this case, try to keep the communication about personal issues to a minimum (or not at all with younger children). If your kids are teenagers, speak in respectful ways about the people involved and share the situation in very general terms. These transitions can be painful, and they have the potential to impact a teenager's view of the church negatively. Use this opportunity to teach your kids that people are human and imperfect, and that's why their eyes need to be on Jesus, the only perfect One.

### **3 Provide Moments of Closure**

During a season of change, model to your children how to leave a place and end well. Tangibly express this growth mindset by intentionally creating moments that allow your kids to experience closure in their relationships.

If there are people who you wish to thank for opportunities while at the church, invite them to dinner or meet up for coffee. Your kids, depending upon the age, may need moments to say goodbye. Try to squeeze those moments in before you leave.



## **In the Transition**

### **4 Awareness of Attitude**

Our attitude is a reflection of how we are feeling and thinking in any given situation. Throughout a church transition, it is essential to model a good attitude for your children. Although change is hard and often involves loss, it can be positive when you consider the blessings that change can bring. Being aware of the losses and communicating about the transition makes a big difference in your attitude.

### **5 Empathy**

Asking your kids about their feelings—and acknowledging your feelings-- is very healthy. At times, your kids may be angry or even sad. By opening up and sharing that you feel sadness, too, you give your child a meaningful gift. Talking about the situation and the related feelings helps everyone move toward eventual acceptance of the new situation.

When you empathize with your kids, you allow them to feel heard and validated. You can teach them to trust God in the journey, and reassure them that He is using this transition as part of your story.

## 6 Patience & Time

The transition to a new place takes time for every family member. As a parent, you may feel sad, disconnected, and lonely for a season. Your kids may feel sad, disconnected, and lonely, too. When everyone experiences change at the same time, you need the patience to navigate the process.

The transition to a new church can be especially hard for minister's kids. Our family had been at a church for eleven years. It was where our four kids grew up. They had a sense of belonging and connection as the pastor's kids. When we transitioned from that church to another church in town, the new position did not include serving on the staff for a season.

Our son, who was in seventh grade at the time, found it hard to be unknown—unlike the experience in our previous church. He understood there had been a positive benefit to being a pastor's kid and being known in a good way. He was very hesitant to be involved in the new youth group.

As parents, we wanted to be understanding and patient, but at the same time, encourage him to try it. Despite his best efforts, he didn't feel connected. We had to let go of what we thought was best for him, which would have been to get involved with the new youth group.

For some kids, hopping into a new student ministry might come easily and be a good experience. But for our son—and his 9th-grade sibling—it was better to stay connected at the former church for a season. They wanted to remain with their small group where they experienced belonging and connection with trusted adult leaders. Their relationship with Christ's followers was more important than trying to force them to start over in a new church. We decided to offer grace, patience, and time with the transition.

## 7 Connections

Help your kids make connections in their new location. Help them get involved with their age group or connect with other parents who have kids their age. As ministers, we can be so busy with volunteers and staff that we do not spend extra-curricular time with parents who are peers.



# After the Transition

To help your kids transition well, look for ways to build those connections. If you have early elementary age children, schedule a play date at a local park, zoo, or bounce house. If you have teenagers, plan an outing to a movie, escape game, water park, or local theme park. You can help your kids connect well and quickly by arranging some get-togethers with other parents of kids the same age.

Another way to help their connection is by being intentional to meet their new teachers or leaders. That way, the teachers can put a face with a name and be aware of the transition your child is experiencing.

I believe we can teach our kids to handle change and transition well. There are good parts, and there are hard parts, but most of all, there are comforting truths to learn. We can trust that God loves us and cares for us, even if we are struggling with sadness, loss, patience, and understanding. God is able and willing to use everything for good (Romans 8:28).

*Lora Helton is a wife, mom to four children and two daughters-in-law, Nana to three grandchildren, and a life coach. She enjoys coffee, nature, and spending time with women. She desires to encourage women in their parenting and marriage journey as well as discovering who they were created to be. You can reach Lora at [www.wellspringtn.com](http://www.wellspringtn.com).*

An open white door in a room with light wood floors and white walls. The door is open, revealing a bright, empty space beyond. The text is centered over the door.

# HOW TO ENTER A CHURCH WELL

By Jeff Helton

# Listen and learn before you lead.



At its core, I believe the local Church is about relationships. Yes, vision matters. Yes, a strategy is needed. Operationalize is important. But the Church, in its nucleus, is relational.

When ministers take a position of leadership and enter a new environment, one of the most significant action steps is to do nothing. In other words, don't go in with a new philosophy of ministry and immediately change everything.

This recommendation may sound counterintuitive, but researchers agree that the best thing you can do at the beginning of any new venture is to observe.

For the first thirty to sixty days, meet people. Connect with key leaders. Ask questions and then ask follow-up questions. Look for other high-level leaders that you have met or heard of and listen to their observations of the Church.

I frequently coach people to develop six to eight questions related to their new place of service or philosophy of ministry. For example:

- Tell me about some of the best days in the ministry.
- Tell me about some of the hardest days in the ministry.
- What is happening within the ministry you wish would stop?
- What do you wish would happen in the ministry?

Ask those questions to numerous people- volunteers, parents, staff- before making any decisions or changes.

Regardless of your position in the organizational chart, spend time with other key staff members above you, beside you, and below you--from the senior pastor to the student minister to the custodial staff. Identify key volunteers, and get to know them and what they love. Ask them what they would change.

Ultimately, when you enter a new Church position, your greatest friend is curiosity. *"Wow, I don't know that story. Tell me more about that."* Every Church body has its history, lore, skeletons in the

closet, successes, and failures.

To hear the heartbeat of people early on is critical. In those first two months, spend time in meetings and over coffee and in conversations. It will lay a solid foundation that can last years and, possibly even decades.

After you have listened, gathered information, hosted focus groups, and sat in circles of dessert nights, you can finally begin to lead.

Take the information you learned and develop your new philosophy of ministry and its practical plan. Then offer the people one of the greatest gifts you can give them: communication.

Let people know, *"Hey, in a couple of weeks, I am inviting a group of you together to share my observations about what I've seen around the church these first 30 to 60 days."* In the meeting, relate to them your observations.

Second, share with them. *"This direction is what I feel God is stirring in my heart. I have listened to you and learned. I have listened to Him, and now I am ready to lead us into the next season of ministry here at the Church."* Provide an overview of your philosophy of ministry, as well as the practical plan for implementation.

Third, open the floor for comments and conversation. *"What are your thoughts? What would it be like for us to go after the big, very*

*audacious goal I just revealed in front of you?"*

If you want to transition into a Church well, there must be an order. I believe it begins with listening. You need to communicate that their life is more important than your unique vision. Listen and learn before you lead, and you will transition into your Church well.

*Jeff Helton has been married to Lora for over thirty-two years and is a dad to four adult children, two daughters-in-law, and Papa to three grandchildren. He served as a pastor for over 25 years. Currently, he is a life coach and consultant who works with individuals, couples, and teams in churches and the business world. You can reach Jeff at [www.wellspringtn.com](http://www.wellspringtn.com).*



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Curiosity is your  
greatest friend when  
you start a new  
position.

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