

Parting shots: When church members leave

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [September 22, 2009](#) issue

It's always wonderful when a new family joins our church. It's easy for the congregation to feel that it's fulfilling its calling, and easy for me to think that I'm being a good pastor. Of course, people also leave churches. I confess that over the years there have been a few people whose departure was a relief to me, but for the most part it is very sad when someone leaves our church, particularly since we are a small congregation, and every person's absence is noted and deeply felt.

There are natural and inevitable reasons that people leave churches. People move away or die. Sometimes a marriage falls apart, and neither the husband nor the wife feels comfortable in the church community that they shared as a couple. These departures give us a chance for closure. On the last Sunday before a family moves away, we gather around the family members, lay hands on them and send them off with prayers of blessing. Even when a family falls apart and the tragedy leads to someone leaving the church, there is usually an opportunity for conversations and prayers.

Most of the time when people leave our church, however, they just disappear. We notice their repeated absence after some weeks have passed. If I can track them down, they'll often give me their parting shot, a short, abbreviated explanation of why they are leaving. These parting shots can be difficult to understand. Sometimes people are angry over a real or imagined slight. Some people cannot honestly address why they are leaving the church, so they convince themselves that they're "just not being fed," or they need a place with more music or better music or different preaching. Sometimes people just lie—they don't want to admit that they'd rather attend a large church where no one notices when they sleep in on Sunday morning, so they point a finger at a theologically wayward Sunday school teacher, or at my sermons. Once a woman said to me, "I don't know what's happened to your preaching, Gordon. Your sermons used to inspire me so much. But now they don't, so we're just going to have to try somewhere else."

Being in the ministry requires us to develop a thick skin. We need to learn to spot the bull and let it go without wasting too much emotional energy on it. But we also need to cultivate the ability to hear what people are really saying by listening to what is behind their words. However painful it may be, we must listen to the parting shots of those who leave, because there is truth buried there—below the anger and the scapegoating and the general dishonesty. My advice is to ignore one person's opinion of you or your ministry, and to watch for trends and patterns.

Over the years I noticed a repeating scenario at our church. A person or a family would join after not having attended church since they were children. In at least two of these occasions, our church led these people to Christ and baptized them. For a while they seemed happy, but then old messages from their childhood resurfaced. Television preachers, whom they now listened to, sowed seeds of doubt. Extended family members who were happy that they were back in church started urging them to return to the church tradition of their family of origin.

I remember Kirk and Sarah. They were neighbors of ours, and our kids were friends. Kirk's father was a Baptist minister, but Kirk hadn't been in church since he was 18. From his perspective, he had been leading a wayward and sinful life. They joined our church and became involved. Then one Sunday I noticed Kirk scowling during the sermon. The next week he told me they were leaving. "I want to make sure my kids get their doctrine," he said.

"We have doctrine," I replied.

"Yeah, but I need to make sure they get the right doctrine."

They headed for a Baptist church down town, where they seemed to fit in well. Last I heard, Sarah was singing in the choir.

The deacons and elders and I have spent a lot of time talking about this recurring pattern. We've decided that we have been called to be a kind of hospital church. Apparently one of our callings is to welcome people to the church or back to the church, but then gracefully let them move on to more traditional churches if that's where they believe they should be. I once told someone we are the "Broadway Danny Rose" of churches. We paid attention to what was happening, thought about whether or not we should change, and decided that ours is a legitimate calling. Having decided this, we've been able to relax about it and not be so anxious.

But not every pattern points to a quirky calling. A good number of people who left our church said that they never felt like they were a part of the family. Sometimes I heard this from people who never made much of an effort to fit in. But sometimes I heard this from people who attended for a year or more, tried to make friends and still didn't feel at home. One man said, "Covenant is a hard nut to crack." This has been an important message for us to hear, and we've spent a lot of time talking about it. We've concluded that we are a contemplative, somewhat introverted church, and because of this, it takes effort for newcomers to make a place for themselves here. We've decided that we need to make a greater effort not only to welcome people on Sunday mornings—which we do very well—but also to invite them into our lives. That's not always easy for introverted people to do.

For me as the pastor, these parting shots have one more effect. They are sometimes directed at our church's abilities and shortcomings, and for the first six to eight years that I was a pastor, they wounded me deeply. It would sometimes take me two weeks to recover fully. After a number of years I began to respond defensively, telling myself that the remarks said more about the people leaving than about me or the church. Behind my attitude was a smoldering anger born of pain, and of a fear that perhaps I wasn't doing a good job.

After almost 20 years at Covenant Baptist Church, I've found a middle ground. When people leave our church I listen carefully to their reasons. There's nothing much to be gained by arguing with them; after all, by the time people work up the courage to tell the minister they are leaving, they have made their decision. Sometimes I think the reasons they give are silly and don't worry much about them. Sometimes I recognize them as parting shots offered in anger. Sometimes I see truth in what people say. On those occasions, I can own up to our congregation's weaknesses without losing a sense of our congregation's worth.

If we expect people to hear the truth, we must be willing to hear the truth ourselves. If we proclaim grace, we must be full of grace ourselves. We must be humble enough to own up to our weaknesses as churches, and not be so grandiose as to think that if we drop the ball, there is no one else to pick it up. We are but one small part of the body of Christ.