

The Beautiful Mess of a Successful Leader's Leaving

My friend, [Rob Wegner](#), announced to our church in September that he is leaving.

Nineteen years ago when I joined the staff at [Granger](#), a new church meeting in a movie theater and averaging less than 300 each weekend, there were only five people on staff. And Rob was one of them.

For the entire time I've been at Granger, Rob has been a rock star. He's been foundational to our movement and at the core of our vision. He's lived a life of integrity every step along the way. His beautiful wife, [Michelle](#), has been by his side leading and supporting through every mountaintop and valley experience. I will be forever grateful for being able to live and work in Rob's shadow for nearly two decades.

I will talk more about Rob on another day. But today, let's think about how a church should respond when a respected and honorable leader chooses to go somewhere else. And **why is it that so many churches get this wrong?**

Here is a typical cycle...

1. John, a leader at First Church, has served faithfully for a number of years.
2. He decides he wants to do something else, and might even say, "God is calling me to do something else."
3. The pastors and leaders get their feelings hurt that he is leaving. It feels like, "John doesn't want to play on our team any more. He took his ball and his bat, and now he's going to play on a different team." It feels very personal.
4. Emotions run very high. Words get said. Insinuations are made. People are reactive. Focus goes toward what John doesn't like or why John isn't staying.
5. Others in the church take sides. "Yeah, we agree with John!"
6. All the right words are said publicly, but in the hallways of the church, a cloud has developed over John's departure. Some of John's work over the years begins to be discounted. His motives are questioned.
7. John leaves feeling like he got kicked in the gut. He was trying to do the right thing but feels like he's abandoning the people he loves and damaging relationships he cherishes.
8. The remaining leaders feel like they got kicked in the gut. Their associate for so many years is going off to do something else and is beginning to talk about what why he wants to do something different. It stings.
9. For months, every time John's name is brought up, there is a tinge of pain and discomfort.
10. John leaves feeling like he not only walked away from a ministry where he gave a part of his life—but he also lost some dear friends.

Ugh. Why does it have to be this way?

The truth is, it doesn't. But **the alternative takes really hard work**. I talked about this more at the [Innovate Conference](#) last month. Here are a few quick thoughts:

To the church...

- It's okay to be sad.
- You have to sequence your communication carefully.
- You will be emotional, but rise above it when you are making decisions.
- **Err on the side of grace**. Even though you are sad they are leaving, do everything you can to bless them.
- Focus on the years they have served at the church—not the days or weeks after they said they are leaving.

To the individual leaving...

- Don't convince yourself you are more righteous than the people you are leaving.
- Be humble and gracious.
- Say "thank you" in every conversation.
- **Don't try to fix the church** in your closing conversations. If you couldn't fix it as a staff member, you are definitely not going to be able to fix it on your way out.

There is so much more to be talked about, which I will do next month. But for now, just let me say that if you want to see someone who gets this and is leaving well—watch [Rob Wegner](#). He has walked with care and love and a high regard for his family and church every step of the way.

These situations are going to be messy. A "good leave" is not defined by lack of mess. It is defined by how both sides respond to the mess and work through it with love and grace.

Have you watched some bad departures? Seen any good ones? I'd love to hear your story.

Read more from Tim [here](#).