

# Where Does a Pastor Go to Resign?

*Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith;  
be men of courage, be strong.*

—1 Cor. 16:13

Autumn leaves of red, gold, and bronze scattered the pathway like giant, intricately shaped confetti. My husband walked beside me, hands in his pants pockets, gazing ahead. As I dangled my arm loosely through his, late afternoon sunlight cast lengthy shadows behind us. It was a perfect day, except for the troubled frown that cast its own shadow across Jim's handsome features. "I'm going to resign the church," he said evenly.

Something deep in my heart crunched like a dry leaf.

It had been an unusually vibrant season in northern California, a nostalgic reminder of our growing-up years in the Midwest. We met in the fall and courted as he finished college, preparing to enter the ministry. In those days, our hand-in-hand walks across campus overflowed with casual conversation, warmed by laughter, love, and eager expectation. Now almost 20 autumns later, the frosty resolve in his voice chilled the air around us.

It certainly would not be the first time we had left one church to shepherd another. But the circumstances this time were very different. We had been in this church of 150 people less than two years and were really just settling in. Jim had developed close ties with staff, and I was teaching a women's Bible study and participating in other ministries. We loved it here. From the morning we first walked through the sanctuary doors, it felt like home. The congregation embraced us like extended family and responded warmly to my husband's contemporary, down-to-earth style of ministry. They caught his enthusiasm for finding new and creative ways to reach the surrounding community. By the end of the first year, we

were holding two Sunday morning services and making plans to expand our facilities. God had directed us to this place for this time. We knew it without a doubt.

Then family problems took us on an unexpected journey with many devastating twists and turns.

Stopping on the path, I looked away, fixing my eyes on a branch with one clinging leaf. Somehow I identified. "Honey, we already talked about this. I thought we were in agreement that resigning is not the answer."

"Then what is?" He stared down the winding path, as if the answer might appear at the end.

"I don't know. Surely the church won't hold us responsible for our children's actions."

"Maybe not, Judi. But I just can't continue to stand behind the pulpit and preach to others when I don't even know how to help my own family."

I looked at a face that was sad but determined—a determination I knew well. He had made up his mind.

Following the move to this pastorate, it had been only six months before the difficulties began to surface. Our three handsome and energetic sons were ages 8, 11, and 13. Outgoing and seemingly well adjusted, they had already made numerous moves—often inherent with ministry—quite easily. This time, though, they were forced to leave the Christian school they liked. For three years they had thrived there academically and been involved in a myriad of sports and extracurricular activities. All their friends were part of the church or school. It was a happy and protected environment.

Then the call came from Sacramento to pastor a new church—a smaller church. My ambitious, innovative husband was intrigued by the challenge of applying his gifts to helping it grow. Its obvious potential presented an irresistible opportunity. Unfortunately, it also presented a cut in salary and benefits, which meant tuition for Christian school was out of the question. Our boys would have to return to public school. Homeschooling was relatively new and uncharted at the time, so we never considered it as an option. For our two elementary age boys, it wasn't such a drastic change. But our oldest son, who had just turned 13 and had entered the eighth grade, was thrust into adolescent crisis.

Now he was just another kid in a big school trying to find his place. Where did he belong? He tried getting involved through sports, but they were much more competitive. Never one to just sit on the bench, he soon gave up. When you've been a big frog in a little pond, it's tough to feel like a tadpole again.

Unfortunately, the youth group in our small church didn't offer much for his age in the way of companionship or excitement. So he gravitated toward those at school who most readily accepted him—others who didn't flow in the mainstream either. They weren't necessarily bad kids, but kids who offered no spiritual support, no reinforcement that his values were worth keeping. The more we tried to keep him close and involved in the church, the less he showed interest. Being included, being part of the crowd, was what mattered most. He wanted to hang out with his school friends. Yet even with them, he was lonely and hurting as he struggled between compromise and conscience.

As the months passed, we watched him grow angrier, pain etched in the hardness of his face. Soon he was begging us, "Please let me go back to the other school. I can live with my friend, John. His mom said it's OK."

Break up our family? We couldn't consider it. We were a ministry family, after all. We would continue to trust God, and everything would be fine. Surely this was a passing phase. He adjusted before; he would eventually adjust again.

He didn't.

The months ahead found us trudging into frightening and unfamiliar territory as our son's anger and frustration turned inward. Soon our entire family was involved in his struggles. The other boys had their own adjustments and were watching to see how we would handle this new behavior at home. We wondered, too. Over the next few months we tried every positive reinforcement ploy: verbal affirmation, compromises, deals, even monetary rewards for good behavior. We talked, we prayed, and we preached. Little good that did. *Maybe it's just temporary*, we told ourselves. *Let's hold our ground until things smooth out*. But as every boundary we set was willfully crossed, it felt as if we were being backed into a minefield of tension-filled emotion. Take the wrong step, and something was going to blow.

We didn't know how to help our son. By this time he was regu-

larly breaking curfew, smoking, lying to us about his activities, and performing poorly in school both academically and socially. We also suspected he was experimenting with drugs and alcohol. He showed little remorse when we confronted him and was belligerent toward our attempts to discipline him. After these confrontations, it was not unusual for him to storm out of the house. Sometimes it took a day or two for us to track him down. Desperate, we tried a number of counselors and intervention programs, with limited success. To make matters worse, our middle son was beginning to reflect some of the same behavioral problems. As the situation spiraled out of control, we hung onto faith, prayed for wisdom, and labored to console each other.

And our problems were quickly becoming apparent to our church.

Is there anything more devastating for a minister than setting out to win the world but then losing a grip on his own family? What a paradox! Here he is, the spiritual quarterback, running the ball into the end zone for the Lord while his kids are tearing down the goal posts and burning them in protest before the crowd. While it might seem reasonable for fledglings in the faith to make a wrong play here or there, the pastor is the one who comes up with strategies and calls the spiritual shots. At the first sign of trouble, the obvious question is *How can this possibly be happening? We've tried to do everything right. We followed all the rules. Where did we go wrong?* Questions become silent specters that haunt our thoughts and prayers. More frightening is to hear them echoing around the pews. I vividly remember the Sunday morning someone approached to tell me she had heard about my son getting in a fight and to assure me of her prayers. It was the first I knew about it—not quite the way I wanted to find out.

You would think in our socially enlightened age, people wouldn't still be putting ministers' families on pedestals—especially after the prominently televised falls from grace of a few big-time evangelists. On the contrary, these only served to heighten people's awareness, inside and outside the pews, of what is evangelically expected. So while the local minister's misdeeds may not make the national news, they still often headline the hometown hotline. Faster than you can say *Google-dot-com*, words that used to cackle over clotheslines crackle over E-mail.

As soon as the preacher blows it, everybody knows it.

Seems the congregation still has expectations: not only will the minister practice what he preaches, but his family will too. His home should be the model manse for their spiritual subdivision, complete with glass walls. Whatever happens there, the pastor's high visibility provides the equivalent of a PowerPoint presentation bullet-marking his faults and failures—on a 46" screen.

When he experiences family problems, a distinct line is quickly drawn between him and the average parishioner's family.

Unfair? Maybe. Yet no one understands this better and expects it more than the pastor himself. Like it or not, it goes with the territory. So he and the Mrs. do their best to ensure their cherubs toe the line. When things happen to the contrary, the feelings of frustration, failure, and humiliation are magnified. No wonder when caught between church and family, many see resignation as the only honorable, face-saving way out. There's just one small problem.

Where does a pastor go to resign?

Certainly you can hand the church board a piece of official stationery with the typed words indicating your intentions. Following a clearing of throats and mumbled objections, they may even accept it. But the reality is that though the board invited you to this particular place of ministry, they did not issue your divine commission. That came from God, whose "gifts and . . . call are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:25). You may leave the church, but you don't just walk away from the call of a lifetime.

On that long-ago autumn day, no one understood that dilemma better than Jim and me. Struggling at times with an overwhelming sense of frustration and failure as parents, our walks had become temporary escapes from the stress. Maybe we hoped a change of scenery might reveal what had gone wrong and how to fix it, all the while knowing we couldn't go back or change the present circumstances. All we could do was pray for future wisdom. Was there a possibility of continued ministry in the middle of what seemed like such a mess? Maybe we shouldn't even continue to try.

First and foremost, of course, we were concerned for our children. But Jim's concern was compounded as he contemplated how our situation might reflect negatively on the church. His was a three-fold obligation—to his family, to the church, and to God. I worried, knowing that on a crucial, personal level he was ques-

tioning his effectiveness on all counts. In the end, it was my husband's strong sense of personal integrity that prevailed over all other considerations.

Two days later he presented his resignation to the church board.

I've wondered many times since that fall day in 1985 where we would be now had it not been for six incredible, godly men who tore up that piece of official stationery with the typed words indicating my husband's intentions. Instead, they stood that morning encircling him in prayer. One board member spoke clearly: "Pastor, do you think we haven't been through this with some of our own kids? No way will we let you walk through this alone." In that awesome atmosphere they committed themselves to standing with us and supporting our ministry. Because of their leading, the entire church followed suit through our seven-year tenure of ministry. We're eternally grateful, especially after hearing of other pastors who have been less fortunate.

That day was a true crossroads in more ways than we could know. But God knew. As circumstances unfolded, we would desperately need that affirmation and support. Even today we find strength in the memory. By God's grace our ministry flourished, but the struggles at home were just beginning. That changing season of the year ushered in a time of change in our lives, one that would last for many seasons to come.

What does a pastor do when it becomes apparent that problems in the parsonage aren't going away? Is resigning your church the only answer when your home is in turmoil? There are too many variables for a one-size-fits-all answer. We've seen many ministers over the years give up too soon and lose not just their churches but future ministry, family, and in some extreme cases, their relationships with the Lord. That should never happen.

Dear friend in ministry, God has called you for a purpose. Never doubt it for a moment. He's ready to walk with you through these difficult days. No matter how things seem, He loves you, and He loves your children—even more than you do. "The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it," Scripture says (1 Thess. 5:24). Do what? Keep us blameless until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (see v. 23). Now I ask you—if God sees us as blameless, why are we often so hard on ourselves?

Could it be we suffer from a bit of spiritual pride? As ministers, we know God's word. We teach it. We practice it. We depend on His faithfulness to it. Then one day God asks us to put our faith where our family is, and suddenly we're floundering. Why? Because, contrary to congregational concepts and our own doctrine-induced delusions, we don't really walk on water. We give swimming lessons. So when we find ourselves in the deep end, what happens? We automatically kick into preacher mode and start applying the correct strokes—until we realize it's farther to the side of the pool than we anticipated.

Then, like any panicked parishioner, we throw all pride and pretensions aside and resort to doing the really spiritual thing: we dog paddle like crazy. Too late. Weak and weary, going down for the third time, we hear ourselves speak those incredible, scriptural words of faith: *Lord, don't you care that I'm drowning here? Maybe I should just take a big gulp and get it over with.*

It's resignation time.

My husband had an experience a number of years ago that he often uses as a sermon illustration. He had taken a group from one of our churches on a missionary outreach to the Philippines. After a strenuous week of services to the church and community, they were treated to a much-needed day of rest and relaxation. This involved sailing in an outrigger canoe to a small, nearby island. Heading out, the midmorning sun turned each wave into a translucent blue-green prism. The sky was a cloudless cerulean canopy. The group spent a glorious day snorkeling, beach combing, and enjoying a picnic.

As they climbed into the outrigger for the return trip, Jim noticed some foreboding clouds in the distance. A stiff wind chopped the sea's surface into frothy white caps. Not even halfway back, a sudden storm had the group riding six-to-eight-foot waves. As water broke over the outrigger's hull, my husband remembers becoming distinctly aware of two things. The shore was still a long way off, and the captain was the only one with a life jacket. Jim knew he could never swim that far, so he did the only logical thing—he stayed in the boat.

The trip seemed to take forever, because instead of making straight for shore, the captain kept turning the outrigger to ride up one side of a wave, then down the other. Otherwise the boat

would capsize, and they would all be tossed into that angry ocean. Time stood still. With a death grip on the sides of the boat, Jim ventured a look at the captain. His face was set but serene. It was apparent that he knew exactly what he was doing.

Eventually, with much thanksgiving, they made it to shore.

The lessons Jim relates from that experience are these: storms come quickly and when we least expect them. It may take longer to ride out the waves than we anticipated. When that happens, there are only two things to do—(1) stay in the boat, and (2) trust the captain.

Many who've had a near-drowning experience will tell you they see their whole lives flash before them in those last moments. I'm sure this is both frightening and enlightening. It's frightening because the unedited video of our lives can be quite revealing. It's enlightening because it forces us to face life honestly with renewed priorities.

Have you ever had a spiritual "splash-back?" I have. Maybe you'll relate to these.

My first splash-back: strive as we might, we weren't the perfect parents. I'm sure all of us started with the goal to be as good as or better at raising kids than our parents were. We memorized the child-rearing books, attended parenting seminars, joined the Pointers for Parents Sunday School class, and clipped out helpful articles.

Still our greatest parenting example is God himself. He loves His children, and His greatest desire is that they be in fellowship with Him. So what did *He* do? Like any good parent, right from the get-go, He provided Adam and Eve with a flawless living environment in the Garden of Eden. A place to walk, talk, have picnics—you know the story. He also set boundaries, which He lovingly monitored. Even with everything going for them, it didn't take long for the kids to tumble into trouble. Sound familiar? Not unlike many preachers' kids, it boiled down to an identity problem that resulted in rebellion and some pretty severe consequences. Of course, they also had some unsolicited support from a certain snake.

From Genesis on, God's Word illustrates clearly why there is an unavoidable probability of prodigals. As long as there is temptation and free will, there will be those who choose to believe a lie rather than embrace God's perfect plan for their lives. They see God's



laws only as an attempt to prevent them from living their own way, and they rebel. Consequently, God has a plethora of prodigal children wandering the world today. And we think we have problems! The eternal Good News is that God has another plan already in place. Here's our hope. Even when our best-laid plans fail, He still has a plan for our prodigals.

My second splash-back: we are not the only shepherds struggling with a straying sheep. It's possible that no home comes under tougher attack by the enemy than that of ministry families. Just as Satan infiltrated God's perfect garden, he's still attempting to devour many preachers' pastures. He would really like us to just pack up and move on. I don't know about you, but it makes me mad enough to dig in my heels and stay. I'm not leaving until my lambs find the way home. Just thinking about it makes me want to punch the devil in the nose—which I have many times, spiritually speaking. We must not give him the satisfaction of our resignation. Ministry may carry a higher risk of enemy attack, but that's because we're doing something right. It's a divine calling—remember?

It's also a very personal one.

My third splash-back: While we chose at some point to answer God's call to ministry, our children didn't. They were born into a pastor's home whether they wanted to be or not. It's not unusual for preachers' kids to go through a questioning time, even a rebelling phase. That's not necessarily bad. In fact, it can be an important part of their spiritual growth. It means they're sorting things out and making a personal decision about serving God, not just riding on their parents' spiritual coattails.

It could even be that God is asking some of them to try on the clerical collar or missionary mantle for size. Maybe it scares them to death. After all, they know firsthand what this ministry gig is all about. They've seen their parents struggle to make ends meet on a pastor's meager salary. They've watched Dad drag in after a tough board meeting or midnight hospital call. They've heard him being raked over the coals by an irate parishioner. Yes, they know firsthand about the demands placed on the pastor's time, not to mention the expectations for his wife and family. They may be thinking, *No way*. The pressure on pastors' kids to perform is incredible. No wonder they need time to figure out whether it's God speaking or Memorex.

Don't throw in the mantle just because your kids are asking some tough questions.

It is true that some kids' simple struggles develop into dynamic dilemmas. Why is that? I wish I knew. There are too many contributing factors to come up with any one formula: personalities, family dynamics, hurtful situations, unforeseen crisis, outside influences, to name just a few. Only God knows every individual heart, hurt, and circumstance.

In either case, the decisions our children make are ultimately between them and God. If only we could manage not to take them so personally. When ministry is your life, the feeling of personal rejection has so many added dimensions.

Here's a concluding splash of truth. Though resigning may remove you from the immediate pressures and embarrassment of your situation, it does not necessarily eliminate the problem. In most cases our lives are only complicated by a whole new cycle of guilt and frustration. And did I mention failure? The last thing we need when our children are facing an identity crisis is one of our own. The assurance that we remain in the center of God's will goes a long way toward helping us cope when everything else seems to be crashing down around us.

Despite the personal pain, Jim and I stayed the course in ministry, and it has rewarded us on many levels. It has not been easy. But as we've fought Satan for possession and sought God for wisdom, our prayer muscles have been strengthened, and we've had to keep our Sword sharpened. Our situation has also opened doors of ministry that have allowed us to touch hearts and lives in ways and places we never imagined, not to mention those who have touched us. More often than not, at the end of services conducted to encourage others, we find ourselves enveloped in empathetic prayer. Or people will come to share a personal story of victory. A number of these encouraging stories will be woven as illustrations through other chapters in this book.

The words of love and encouragement spoken into our lives over the years are too many to number. Whether they come verbally or in the form of frequent E-mails, occasional letters, or annual Christmas greetings, they're always timely. Just recently a memorial service held at the church where our prodigal journey began brought together many of the original parishioners. My

heart was touched by those who, after all these years, made a point to ask about our children.

One thing is certain. Without the mooring of ministry and faithfulness of friends, the journey would have been longer and lonelier.

Even so, one of the biggest hurdles for my husband was talking with other ministers regarding this very sensitive part of our lives. Doesn't it seem like this would be the one place a pastor could let down appearances? Not necessarily. As ministers, we all strive foremost for God's approval, but running a close second is respect among our own peers. We tend to guard our reputations like the head usher counting Sunday morning's offering.

That's understandable.

We may not like to acknowledge it, but ministers can be a bit competitive with a tendency toward comparison. Strong opinions about what will make or break your ministry have been known to flow freely in seminarian circles. There is also a fair amount of critical thinking. Sad to say, some ministers are quick to make assumptions about where you are and how you got there. I know, because we've done it ourselves and had to ask forgiveness. More than once we've made harsh judgments or negative comments about fellow ministers without taking time to gather facts or hear both sides of the story. When you suddenly find yourself in need of grace, those wincing memories make a hearty filling for humble pie. No wonder a pastor with a kid kicking in the closet would feel a bit threatened. Just the thought of being that vulnerable could subject us to the recurring nightmare of standing behind a glass pulpit wearing nothing but a Bible and boxers.

For my husband it was not so much a pride issue as a privacy issue. He's just not the type of personality who's inclined to share personal problems of any kind—especially those concerning family. While I respect and appreciate that, I was concerned that he had no confidant who understood the pressures of ministry. I could call a number of close friends for prayer and support, but my husband didn't seem to feel that freedom or need. This was the subject of more than one "There must be other pastors going through this besides us" discussions.

Then a few years down the prodigal path, one of our denominational officials phoned.

"Jim, I'm hoping you might be willing to conduct a workshop

at our upcoming leadership conference."

"Sure. What did you have in mind?"

"I'd like you to share a testimony on the topic of prodigals in the parsonage."

"Oh."

Though a number of close ministry friends knew the specifics of our struggle, this was Jim's first invitation to address a formal group. It was also his first inkling that our situation must have reached executive ears.

We discussed it later that evening over coffee. "I don't imagine there'll be a large number interested in hearing about this." He was trying to convince himself.

"Probably not," I agreed and encouraged him to do it. "I'm sure it will be helpful to those who do come. Anyway, you sure have a mountain of material." He agreed to accept the challenge.

When he walked into the conference room that day, armed but apprehensive about sharing our story, he was nothing short of shocked. The room was packed. Could there really be that many ministry friends struggling with prodigal issues? He soon found out. Not only were they dealing with the common emotions we share when our children stray from faith, but they were also struggling with the devastating ripple effect on their ministries.

My husband also discovered that many had suffered silently for a long time. Somehow that gave him the resolve to be open and honest. He spoke not only about the feelings of disgrace at the black mark on our ministry but also about dashed hopes for our son and fears for his future. As Jim risked being transparent, those pastors found the courage and a safe forum to share their own painful prodigal stories.

"My daughter is living with an abusive boyfriend."

"My son's been through drug rehab three times now."

"We don't even know where our child is."

"We never get to see our grandkids."

"I thought we were the only ones."

"We've felt so ashamed and guilty."

Many tears of release, healing, and hope were shed that day as we prayed and encouraged one another.

One of my favorite examples appears in a Psalm written by a fellow shepherd. David was soon to understand the pain of his

own prodigal son big time when he wrote, “You have taken account of my wanderings; Put my tears in Your bottle. Are they not in Your book?” (Ps. 56:8, NASB). Picture that. Somewhere in heaven, God is collecting our tears, similar to the way we keep all our children’s report cards and baby teeth, perhaps. I’ve imagined Him on some eternal afternoon taking out a big, tattered box with my name on it and saying, “Look here, Judi. You had quite a journey with those boys. It appears you took a few detours here and there, but the important thing is you stayed the course. Well done.”

And our tears? I suppose, like baby teeth, they’re necessary only for a season, since Scripture tells us that in heaven there will be no more crying. Still, for now, it’s nice to know He’s keeping track.

After that eye-opening conference, Jim and I agreed on a very different type of resignation. If this was our path, short or long, we would find ways to encourage fellow pastors and others in the same situation. Together with them, we would believe that in the pain of our prodigals God has both a personal and far-reaching purpose.

Most important, we resigned our situation to God, trusting Him for strength and wisdom to keep following His direction, not only for ministry but for everything.

Since that first workshop, Jim and I have both had countless opportunities to share our experience and message of encouragement in many public venues. And over the years we’ve been invited to a lot of homecoming parties. “Our son is back home,” one minister tearfully announced to us at a recent retreat. “I wanted you to be the first besides family to know.” Their son had been away from home for many months and had ended up in jail. It was there where he called his parents to tell them that he was scared and tired of running. He wanted help finding his way back to God and family. A few weeks later, they threw a welcome-home party straight out of Scripture. The menu featured grilled chicken instead of fatted calf, but it was a celebration that family will never forget. What a joy and encouragement when someone we’ve cried and prayed with shares a prodigal praise report!

Where are you in the prodigal process today? Do your kids simply need an open ear and some honest answers? Maybe some are truly testing the boundaries, drawing lines in the sand to protest expectations and flaunt their freedom. Perhaps they’ve al-

ready slipped from the safety of the sheepfold, slamming the gate behind them. You can only stand frozen, fighting the urge to chase after them. Your child may be deep in that dreaded distant land, running in vain from God.

That became the ongoing heartache we eventually had to face.

Over many years we squinted daily for that speck on the horizon, for our son's familiar stride on that distant road. We've lived through situations and resulting circumstances that were a pastor's worst nightmare. Even today, two of our grown sons are at arm's length from the faith we tried to instill. Though we no longer feel compelled to rescue them, and though we try hard to resist tossing out unsolicited advice, it's interesting how often they ask for it. They're inching closer, and we are praying harder than ever. And we've never stopped hanging out the lantern of love.

The one thing we must never resign is hope.

Whatever the circumstances, my heartfelt prayer is that your precious prodigals won't be far down the road before coming to their senses and hot-footing it back toward home. I encourage you—don't move from your stand or forsake your ministry. When it's time for your prodigal to return, you need to be home. Trust God, and keep the porch light burning.

*Lord, some who are reading these words today have their resignations written. Wrap Your loving arms around them just now. Comfort them as only a loving Father can do. Encourage them through Your written Word and Your whispered peace. Confirm once more Your call upon their lives and ministries. Give them courage to continue, strength to hold tight, and faith to keep believing. Assure them that they're not alone and that neither are their children. In the name of Your own precious Son, Jesus Christ, the Great Shepherd, who still seeks to save the lost. Amen.*

We all have days when we're full of hope and other days when we struggle with a myriad of overwhelming emotions. The following chapters address both. Together we'll explore the issues related to prodigals that affect ministry, sharing many different stories of hope and help. This book is for those of you in ministry who are waiting, watching, and praying for a child who is missing and missed. May it provide comfort in the waiting, especially in those sleepless hours, give you company in the vigil, and nurture hope for the coming celebration.

And if you're still not sure how it all happened in the first place or what's in the forecast for the future, take heart. Heaven knows, and that's enough.