



### **When Is It Time to Move On?** (by Rev. John Simpson)

Of all the dilemmas which confront pastors, there is only one which is more tantalising than the acceptance of a call to a new ministry. It is the timing of one's departure from a church. Despite all the practical counsel we may offer to others in helping them understand the will of God, when it comes to our own future the way ahead often seems to be overcast and full of uncertainties.

The pondering of the rightness of staying or going has produced many a sleepless night. There are no easy formulae to apply or sanctified buttons to push. There may not be a lightning bolt or a thunder clap let alone a stray fleece lying around the place. For all our affirmations to the contrary, we would prefer to navigate by sight rather than by faith. What is even more perplexing is that the ways of God often appear to lack logic, order and common sense. A conversation with Abraham, Moses or the leaders of the early church would soon demonstrate this.

The continuing stages of life add to the difficulties. Many of us look back with more than mild alarm to early experiences of guidance where life changing decisions were usually made on the run. On the flimsiest of evidence, with minimal prayer or research and no regard whatever for the consequences, the course of life was happily altered with great clarity, total conviction and in a spirit of high adventure. The thought that something could go wrong did not cross our minds.

But years later we are different people. For many of us the flush and passion of youth has been diluted by the arrival of families, educational considerations, bills to pay, a working partner, established networks and heavy commitments. Instead of being able to take up our bed and walk, it requires a semitrailer just to shift the library. Generally speaking, the older we are, the less inclined we will be to set about chasing rainbows! The thought of a burning bush lying in wait for us around the next comer will evoke the full range of emotions from quiet excitement to genuine desperation.

So what do we do? What are the underlying assumptions when it comes to the next move? Some suggestions:

- Without meaning to be foolishly pious or trite, there is a need to affirm the sovereignty of God. This is much easier to do when all goes well. But it is much harder when the wheel has just fallen off and there is heart wrenching drama within and without. It may take years of reflection to see a possible reason for why things happen as they do but there is no guarantee of any clear explanations this side of eternity.
- The Lord has a right to disturb us whenever He chooses. His compassion is not flawed by whimsy, carelessness or a desire to unsettle His people needlessly. But we are His servants. His is the right to reposition us for the good of His Kingdom.
- We will never comprehend the ways in which He is using us. In His goodness, we may see a little from time to time. Christian service is a call to trust, not an invitation to keep looking back over our shoulder to see if we just hit another run for the Gospel or did God some special favour.

What are the circumstances which will prompt us to consider moving on? They are numerous. Some are more straightforward than others. Some examples:

- There may come an inner stirring which may seem to be unrelated to anything which is happening on the surface. In fact, life may be going very well. It could be an initial unease, or unsettlement, or a curious, inexplicable openness to the future. This stirring is not fueled by any unhappiness, sense of frustration or ambition to conquer new territory. It is simply there and may even seem to be wonderfully out of place. It may be felt as a barely discernible change of direction in the blowing of the wind of the Spirit. There is nothing more to do than to pray and remain open to what each day holds. This is not a time to rush, panic or even be preoccupied. If there is anything in it, it will come into focus when the time is right. If nothing else, it may be part of a loosening of the roots, or the fashioning of an attitude which is less possessive and more trusting.
- There may be a real sense of accomplishment in all that you have been doing. As you think back on where the church was when you arrived and where you see it now, there can be a very commendable feeling of having helped the congregation to move on further in effective life and service. There is still much to be done but you do not sense that these are areas where you are particularly gifted. It is time to be open to another stage of the pilgrimage for you and the church.
- There are fewer challenges around these days. Once everywhere you looked there was a hurdle to jump or a mountain to climb. But these days the creative juices are not flowing quite as fast. The enthusiasm level has dropped a notch or two. You have slipped inadvertently into more of a routine in ministry. Life is comfortable and everything is more or less under control. You have already touched down on the plateau and are just waking up to it. This does not necessarily mean that you should be moving on but it does call at least for fresh reading, more study, a little more discipline and a bit more risk-taking. If you are not careful, you will soon be presiding over a very comfortable and boring congregation. Do not rule out the possibility of moving on though.
- You become aware of a diminishing of spiritual growth, zeal and call to mission. It is not that your love for Christ is up for grabs. Rather, the joy and delight of fellowship with the Lord has become formalised and professional. There is a slight heaviness about it now. You are more concerned with the right word or phrase than the right attitude. People are kept at arm's length. It's not that you do not care, it's just that you want to avoid getting too involved. Besides, some people are real vocational hazards! There is a danger of wearing your nose just one degree too high.
- Some of your close friends whose opinion you value suggest that it might be time to be open to a fresh call. You cannot ignore them. They have your best interests at heart, they see the situation more objectively, they do not accept any of your pat answers, they think you should be tuning into the divine guidance frequency. Take them seriously. Talk much. Find out what's prompting them. There is wisdom to be found in the company of caring, praying friends. Thank God for them.
- An invitation may be received to meet with a Pastoral Search Committee. This may produce a real sense of anticipation especially if there is an inherent attraction about the church itself. It will also be potentially unsettling. Unless there are clear and sensible reasons for doing otherwise, there is value in having a conversation. It is always helpful to discover why a PSC wants to talk with you. Their perception of you, your ministry and your gifts will be confidence building. You will need to be well prepared. Even if the conversation ultimately does not lead anywhere, you will know what that church was about. This will save those 'what would have happened if' questions which may come to haunt you later.

There are other reasons why there needs to be an openness to the possibility to a move. These are much more difficult to cope with:

- You realise that you are no longer coping personally with the demands of ministry. Where once you could bounce back and get on top quickly, these days you live in the slough of despond. Long term discouragement and depression is taking its toll. You spend much time on the defensive surrounded by few joys and many problems. Everything seems to be going wrong. Your health is suffering. Your family is paying the inevitable price too. Not only is it time to leave, it is also time to seek immediate counselling. Do not delay.
- A crisis has gripped the church and you are at the centre of it. Whatever the causes, the congregation has become increasingly divided. No matter what you do, or what help is offered, there is tension on all sides. You realise that there is no longer strong support for you as pastor. Not only is this very upsetting but the thought of preaching to the unsympathetic and disloyal is a task too awful to contemplate. You dread Sundays. Minimal support is not enough. The criticism may be unjustified. But the situation cannot be retrieved and the opposition is hardening. There is no doubt that you must move on for your own survival.
- The church has emerged from a crisis but there are still hurts and bruises. You have steered the church through a very rough patch which may have gone on for an extended period of time. Through God's grace you have come out intact and the church is basically in good heart. But you have been wearied by the experience and some of the drama lingers on as it always does. There is a strong case to believe that you need a fresh start and the church does too. It is time for someone who has not been involved in the battle to come in and offer a new lead. It is not that you have failed but simply that both pastor and church need to move into the next stage of the adventure.

There is also the crucial matter of how the decision to move on is made. For many pastors it is the responding to a call issued by the church. This will follow much prayer, many conversations, the seeking of counsel and comprehensive heart searching. But this process is not so for a smaller number of pastors:

- A pastor may genuinely feel that they have fulfilled the brief given to them when they were originally called to the church and, on this basis, offer their resignation without the next call having been negotiated. This is done in a healthy spirit and is marked by a real experience of accomplishment. It is also a great step of faith if the future is not clear. This course of action does not happen frequently.
- When the going is tough and there is a cloud on the church, a pastor may want to resign and be done with it. There are no hard and fast rules here. A rushed resignation will almost always put the pastor at a disadvantage in many ways: the anguish of the situation will be further complicated by the very practical difficulties arising from, say, a loss of income in the event of there being no alternative employment. Further, churches in the future will want to know the circumstances of the resignation and will go to much effort to find out what happened and why. If possible it is generally wiser to seek assistance first in finding another ministry opportunity while continuing to deal with the problem than hurrying away from it.
- Another difficult situation occurs when a pastor receives a call but feels that there is yet much to be done in the church. Of course, this will always been true and has been so for centuries. The question to be wrestled with is that of leaving or staying to do more. Again, there are no easy answers. There is also the recurring fear that to leave is to abandon a group of people who have been very faithful and supportive. This is where much of the pain is felt in moving on to a new ministry. Friendships and relationships do change as a result of a move. There are no quick fixes for the grief experienced. A strong view of Jesus as Lord of the Church helps to understand that there are ways in which He will care for those who are left behind.

The Lord has His own way of stirring us and moving us along. Sometimes there will be mysterious moments when His still, small voice is heard unmistakably. On occasions there will seem to be a coming together of circumstances unaccompanied by any overt divine intervention. Then there may be an unusual intersection of seeming coincidences which carry the fingerprints of the God who guides. Intermingled with all of this there may yet be found significant traces of doubt and uncertainty. At the end of the day, moving on is usually a risk. And so it should be if we are to remain a people of faith!