

Hard Ministry Moments

Series Intro: There are often hard moments in ministry. These moments require you to dig deeper, trust God harder and often step up and take leadership in an area. They often weigh heavy on the soul and are moments you will always remember.

HARD MINISTRY MOMENTS: *Letting A Leader Go*

One of the hardest moments for any Pastor/Director is the moment you need to let go of a volunteer leader. Moments like this are so hard because of the nature of volunteer leaders. The fact that they are VOLUNTEERS is hard enough, but most of the time there is also a relational aspect as well. Most of the time we lead with people we know, hangout with, are friends with and sometimes might even be related to. Before we get to the “HOW” let’s start with two “WHY” questions.

WHY IS THIS SO HARD?

Like I said there is often two factors that make this conversation so hard. The first being that they are a volunteer (even you might be as well). Volunteers serve out of a love, calling, desire or experience in a particular ministry area. If they are involved with Youth Ministry it may be because they want to give back or because they feel called to work with teens. Either way they give enormous amounts of time, energy and resources to whatever they are volunteering in. The other side is no one is making them show up each week. It’s their choice if they come and participate. If all your leaders were employee this would be easy because there is an accountability. Work equals payment, so if you don’t work you don’t get paid. The problem for us is that we don’t have that with our volunteers. You may have a code of conduct or expectations document (that will come up in a bit) but you really still can’t FORCE anyone to follow it. The only leverage you have is to say, “Thanks but no thanks”.

The second factor is relationship. Ministry on any level is a relationship game. We are all in relationship within the Family of God, but also in relationship with each other and our volunteers are in relationship with the people they lead. If you have to sit down and tell your best friend “Thanks but no thanks” it may impact your relationship. Or if you have to let a leader go that is well loved by your students then you are affecting those relationships and there could be pushback or extra drama from kids and their parents.

Letting a volunteer leader go is extremely hard BUT sometimes you need to make hard ministry choices as the Pastor/Director.

WHY DO I HAVE TO LET THEM GO?

We know it’s going to be hard, but why do you need to let them go in the first place? Often, I find most things fit into a few categories.

- **Lack of leadership:** Sometimes volunteers just are not leading. They like the title, perks and social aspect of leadership but are not leading. These kinds of volunteers can cause major problems because they are often unreliable.
- **Moral failure:** A volunteer has had a moral failing. This could be a violation of a code of conduct, inappropriate contact with a student/adult, substance abuse and so on. This type of issue may require immediate removal from leadership for legal reasons. To not do so could put you, the program or the church in jeopardy.
- **Toxic attitude:** These can be great volunteers but when it comes to responding to your authority they are toxic, combative, challenging and unwilling to follow. This is not the same as having an opinion. This is about rebellion to you or the church’s leadership.
- **Personal health:** Sometimes you need to tell a leader to take a break because you can see something in the physical, emotional and spiritual health that they do not see. This is hard

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because it's often an issue with veteran volunteers and the mentality of "they cannot survive without me" often blocks them from seeing what you see... that they need rest.

NOTE: Your situation may not fit into these categories or they may fit into all of them. Regardless of the "why" there is ONE STEP before the "how" that I think is very important.

STOP AND ASK

As Pastors/Directors we have been called to Shepard our flock. To care for those God has entrusted to us and that includes our volunteers. We have a responsibility to STOP and take a moment to **ASK** a single question, "How's your heart?"

This simple question can be a gateway into understanding about what's going on in the life of your volunteer. Years ago, friends of mine were volunteering with my youth group. I was having some "lack of leadership" challenges with them and in a rookie move I didn't bother to STOP. Instead all I did was accuse and call them out public for what I felt was bad leadership at the time. If I had bothered to STOP and ASK them "how's your heart?" I would have found out that there was tons of drama and stuff going on at home. That drama effected how they led at youth and was the root cause of all of the frustrations we were all having. If I would have STOPPED and ASKED how they were doing a lot of hurt could have been avoided.

So before you ever move on to the "how" always remember to STOP and ASK.

HOW DO I LET A LEADER GO?

If after you have STOPPED and ASKED you still feel like you need to let your leader go then you need to follow the Matthew 18 Plan. It may feel simplistic but time and time again when I follow this plan things go better for me then when I don't.

As a refresher here is what **Matthew 18:15-17** says, *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector"*

Let's take some time to break this passage down into some key steps and talk about what each one practically looks like.

Step #1 Just Talk - *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone"*

We often do a good job at seeing the sin/issue that needs correction. We might actually be too good at it sometimes, but regardless we often know when something needs to be addressed. What makes this first step messy is that we ignore the rest of the verse. Instead of going to them in PRIVATE, we go to others in public. Never actually talking to the person who has the ability to actually fix the issue. This is not a public affair for Jesus. He is clear it should be personal and private, but in our modern world we are way too quick to rally others to our opinion as ammunition and proof that what we believe is right.

BEST PRACTICE: Give them a call and set up a coffee or lunch in a public space that can accommodate a private conversation, like Starbucks. Then lay your cards on the table and just talk to them.

AVOID: Doing all the talking. Remember your job in this is to STOP and ASK not lecture.

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Step #2 Best Case Scenario - *“If he listens to you, you have gained your brother”*

This is the ideal because from Jesus’ prospective your brother or sister should be able to receive what you say in love. You in turn should be offering grace and in the end the conversation should be healthy and as Jesus has stated you should walk away as family.

BEST PRACTICE: In this case the hardest part is BELIEVING that it’s over. The enemy likes to plant seeds of doubt in our minds that make us question if everything is really resolved or that they were just telling us what they want us to hear. I find the best solution to this is to come back to it in a few weeks and just make sure things are okay. Again, if it’s all gone this smoothly then there should be no issues checking in.

AVOID: The following statement “are you sure we are okay, I just feel like maybe we are not”. If it’s a healthy process and things have been worked out. Then you need to trust God that this is true. We can never control another person. All we can control is our actions and attitudes and a statement like this one doesn’t help us do that.

Step #3 Involve Others - *“But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses”*

Now things are getting trickier. At this time and ONLY this time do we involve others. The hard part here is that the “others” should not be just your “Yes Men”. Look at who Jesus says to get, *“that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses”*. Basically, bring in people who saw or know the situation. I think we have a habit of bringing in people from the outside because we feel it’s objective. But in reality, I think it comes across as tag teaming with biased people towards the leader being talked to.

BEST PRACTICE: If you're dealing with a particular situation have you as the pastor and them as the leader each pick one person to be involved in the meeting. The only rule would be that they need to have been able to witness and speak to the situation. Again, the goal is restoration and a Step #2 solution.

AVOID: Do everything within your power to avoid the tag team. Speaking from experience this is literally the worse situation and is extremely harmful to long term restoration.

Step #4 Involve Sr Leadership / Elders - *“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church”*

At this point you need to involve more senior people within your church. This could be a Team Leader / Department Head / Deacon and isn’t necessarily the Sr. Pastor and all the church Elders. The goal here is now more moderation and helping both sides come to some sort of resolution.

BEST PRACTICE: I have always found it important for the new party to get one on one time with everyone involved first. Then bring all sides together for a big sit-down conversation. The goal here is to come to a resolution and the Elders/Church represent the highest point of authority.

AVOID: Do not sit them in a room with 15 Elders and then grill them about the issues. This goes back to the same points as Step #3. Others need to be involved but grace and love still need to abound.

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Step #5 Removal and Grace - *“And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector”*

This final set can be politically difficult but it can be needed. Basically, what Jesus is saying is treat them like a non-Christian. Because they have demonstrated behaviour that shows they are unwilling to submit, learn, grow or respond to the body of Christ. Again, this can be a very hard step but the alternative is often far more distractive. This is about removing their authority in the church. Treating them like a non-Christian but also then welcoming them back in love and restoration as a NEW CREATION in Jesus.

BEST PRACTICE: Have a clear understanding of this step but remember that the goal is now the same as any other non-Christian. To welcome them back into the family of God, see them submit to Jesus and walk with him all the days of their life.

AVOID: This is not a get kicked out of the church card we can play on people we don't like or don't disagree with. This is a serious claim Jesus is telling us to make and it should not be made lightly.

FINAL THOUGHTS

No matter the reason, process or outcome of removing a Leader from a ministry position there is one thing that we must NEVER lose sight of... and it's that we have all fallen short. That sin affects us all. That no one on this earth is perfect and every day as Christians we strive to be more like Jesus. Because of this reality in situations like this TRUTH, GRACE and LOVE need to be in abundance. There should always be a path to restoration and not a single one of these steps should be taken out of malice, envy or spite.

This is an extremely hard ministry moment for any Pastor but one that can be life giving, god honouring and rewarded when it's done in the right spirit and attitude. We can be releasing someone to find their true passion, we can free someone up from a saviour complex in a ministry or we can simply be helping them grow closer to God by recognizing how distant they have become.

One of the hardest moments for any Pastor/Director is the moment you need to let go of a volunteer leader, but when God is at the centre of it all the possibilities for everyone are endless.