

Managing to Stick Around, Part Two by Syler Thomas (originally appeared in *Youthworker Journal*, May/June 08)

In my previous column, I tried to make the case that longevity in youth ministry is something to be desired. Youth workers have a reputation of being quite transitory, which ends up limiting their effectiveness. For now, I'd like to investigate what causes youth pastors to leave. In my next article (Sept-Oct), I'll conclude the series with some ideas for how to last.

My tenure at this church has resembled a love affair, and I wonder if that isn't the case with some of you. I fell head-over-heels for the group of students I met, we had a torrid romance, and when those students graduated three years later, I felt as though I had been dumped. There was a part of me that thought: "Well, this was a good run. I guess I should move on now." But something surprising happened: I stuck it out. God gave me a passion for seeing a sustained ministry, and I was able to do more than just capture lightning in a bottle for a short season.

This is not to say that there aren't some good reasons to leave a ministry. Let's look at a few.

- *God has opened a door elsewhere and you feel He's calling you there.* The Apostle Paul and others give us examples of moving around as one model of Christian ministry. I firmly believe God does open doors—if it's clear, you should go.
- *Your fire for your ministry has gone out, permanently.* As a friend described it when he left youth ministry, his passion for that ministry died, and it couldn't be revived. Sometimes it's okay to just be "done" somewhere, and it's time to move on.
- *Your marriage is struggling, and ministry is the main source of friction.* If counseling can't get you through it, then get out now. There will always be another ministry, but your spouse and family have to come first.

On the other hand, I think youth pastors sometimes leave for the wrong reasons. Here are a few:

- *You think your senior pastor or church board doesn't care enough about your ministry, so you want to go somewhere where you'll get the respect you deserve.* There is no perfect senior pastor, and you'll likely be continually fighting the "respect" battle at the next place. Take the chip off your shoulder and keep your eyes on Jesus.
- *There are some difficult people to deal with in your ministry, and you've had enough.* Reality check: you'll find those people anywhere you go, so you might as well figure out how to live with them. Do everything you can to live at peace with them, and enlist the help of others to help resolve conflicts if necessary.
- *You have an early mid-life crisis at 30, and think you can't do youth ministry anymore.* I've talked to other youth pastors, and we all tend to look in the mirror around the age of 30 and wonder: how much longer can I do this? The answer: the older you get, the more wisdom you gain, and, I believe, the better you get. You may not

continue to do ministry the same way you've always done it, but that's probably a good thing too.

Certainly, not all youth pastors will last at one church for ten years or more, but let's make sure if we leave, we leave for the right reasons: for the sake of the kingdom, and nothing else.

A number of years ago, I felt like my ministry here was stagnating, right about the time an attractive job offer opened up at another church. My prayer was this: God, either this new job is for me, or you'll have to give me new vision for this one. The door closed on the other job, and sure enough, God answered my prayer. That fall, I started doing things differently, and I found more satisfaction and excitement in my job than I had had in years.

Next time, I'll examine some practical things you can do to increase your chance at being around for the long haul.