

SATURDAY, JANUARY 28, 2017

How to Get a Fresh Start Without Leaving by Mark S. Adams

Around 2011, all signs were indicating that we were about to take on a new role in a new congregation. Arriving at this willingness took a great emotional toll on us, because we loved the people where we were, and knew without question that we were loved and appreciated there. Having spent a lot of time, carefully weighing our options and what church we might actually be willing to go and work with, we went through an awful, months-long application process with that church.

After some re-assuring comments from several elders at the new location--"We can't wait for you to get started"--a few days later I got an expected phone call, and some unexpected information. They were hiring the other guy. It was a kick in the gut and a cut to the ego.

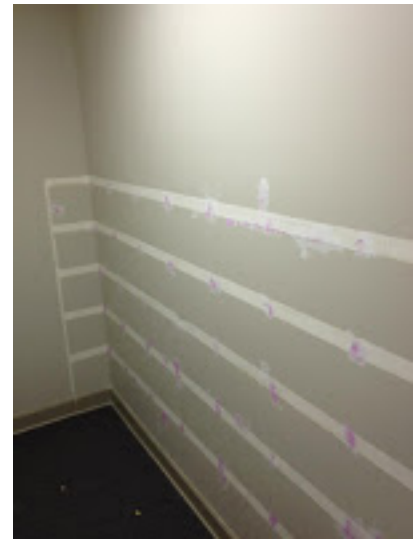
In the end, I stayed three more years at the congregation where I was, and frankly, ended up doing there what I consider the most important work I've done in my ministry to this point, anywhere. I'm glad I stayed longer than I had assumed I would, and am grateful that the work actually grew in its meaningfulness those last years.

But at the time, I realized I was going to have to find a way to get a fresh start. I needed some kind of change for me to be able to adjust my attitude and give myself passionately to my work again. I had burned up my vacation time visiting and interviewing at this other church, and so a dreamy trip out of town wasn't a possible solution.

I decided that since my church needed a new minister (I was getting burned out) and I needed a new start, I would have to let myself be the new guy. I adopted a few methods during this time that have continued to help me significantly in my effectiveness, and in my ability to be joyful about my work, even when parts of it might feel tedious.

How can you give yourself a fresh start without leaving? This is what has worked for me. I'd be glad to hear what works for you.

- **Move out, and move in.** Since I had been planning to move, I decided to go ahead and do it. I took all books off of my shelves and several things down from the walls. I emptied my desk and drawers. I did all the sorting process I would have done if I were moving away and got rid of a lot of junk and clutter, and donated a bunch of old books I hadn't been using.



Beyond that, I had a storage closet with permanent shelving that was nice, but not designed well for the needs of the space. I emptied the space, ripped it all out of the wall, and got better, height-adjustable shelving. I painted the walls and got rid of everything that I knew I didn't need in there.

In my mind, I got a new office and a new closet space. That process was very healthy for me.

- **Have your parting conversations.** From the moment we started thinking we were going to leave, there was a series of conversations that I knew I would need to have. There were people who had been significant in my life, whose influence had inspired me and whose encouragement had carried me through difficulties. I wanted to tell them that. There were areas of great concern I had that I didn't feel were being addressed. I had formulated in my mind what I would need to tell the elders as I was leaving that really needed to happen as things moved forward.
- I had framed these things in my mind as parting conversations that would bring a sense of peace and closure to me as I left. But now I wasn't leaving, and I still felt convicted about the need to communicate those things. So I went ahead and did it. I called and scheduled lunches and visits with several different people I wanted to appreciate. I told them how much they had meant to me and how much they had helped me. *I discovered that a confession of appreciation is every bit as liberating and life-giving as a confession of wrongdoing.* It was great for me to express sincere love and thanks to people who deserved it.
- I met with several of the elders individually, got their permission to be very candid, and told them exactly how I felt about a lot of things. I laid out my struggles, my concerns for some of our blind spots, and some things I really wished we would start working on. It didn't solve every issue, but it took a load off of me to feel like I had done what I could to help them see what I was seeing.

And happily, quite a few things got better once we talked through them. In every case, they were highly interested in both my wellbeing and that of the church. (In my next point, I'll share how I've created better dialogue with the elders where I'm working.)

- I have tried to adopt the practice that whenever I have a strong feeling of appreciation towards someone, I try to get with them and tell them about it. Think about how you would feel if someone scheduled a meeting with you just to tell you why they appreciate you? It's been a great thing every time.
- **Seek out spiritual friendship and mentoring.** If you don't have a trusted person providing you with an outside perspective on yourself, you're going to develop blindspots. These can be blindspots to weaknesses and unintentional harms you are causing, but these can also be blindspots to your strengths, and things you don't realize that people like about you. Knowledge of either is helpful.

A man who was not an elder then, but is now, was the first person I asked to be a spiritual companion. We were reading things together, getting together regularly, and praying with and for each other. It became a meaningful friendship.

My practice now is that **every year**, I seek out two people: one I view as a mentor and one I view as a peer. Around November I approach these people and I ask them if for the next calendar year, they would be willing to form a deeper friendship with me and agree to get together once per month for the purpose of helping each other to grow spiritually. Most of the time, this has taken the form of getting lunch once per month. "Second Thursday every month." That sort of thing. Set and scheduled on both of our calendars.

In my role, I have decided that one of these two people for me should be an elder. I generally try to select whichever one I've not had much time with lately to use the opportunity for friendship building. I invite them openly to shepherd me, to help me see my blindspots, and to help me know what they are perceiving about our church family.

The benefits are numerous. If nothing else, it means that the elders and I always have a direct link, and that our meetings become more like discussions among friends and less like a CEO-Board of Directors gathering. I know what they're thinking, and they know what I'm thinking. Sharing a meal is such a better place to have real conversation than in a stuffy meeting room. But the deeper benefits are my own spiritual growth, and a meaningful connection to the people I work with every week.

Every year, I end the year sad that the current arrangement is changing, but for the sake of continual renewal, I change up my partnership every time. I continue getting with many of my previous companions as well, but I make a formal, scheduled commitment with at least two new people every year.

- **Take a spiritual retreat.** *Note: If you do not currently provide this opportunity for your minister, I beg you to do everything within your power to make this possible for them. You'll get a new minister every year without having to hire or fire anyone.* Jesus needed significant time alone to pray. We are both arrogant and foolish if we think we can be healthy leaders without doing the same.

I arranged in my contract at my current church that every fall, the elders give me one week without any teaching, preaching, visiting, or administrative responsibilities, and I dedicate the entire week to finding quiet places, spending hours in prayer, hours in Scripture reading, and seeking God's direction on what I should be preaching to our people about the following year. The best way to do this is to find a place away from home you can stay. I like going to Lebh Shomea House of Prayer, about 60 miles south from Corpus Christi at the old Kenedy Mansion in Sarita, Texas. As part of this, I actively solicit prayer from the congregation for me as I go away to pray and reflect. I fast from technology. I journal constantly about the movements of my mind, heart, and the ideas that come to me while I'm there.



I will spare you stories for now, but let me say with conviction that I have experienced significant insight through these times that has given me strong conviction that (a) God wants me to be where I am, and (b) that God has been and will continue working through my ministry here; imperfect as I am. These weeks have grown me more than almost anything else I've ever done in my life.

For those of you not in ministry, or for whom a full week is not possible, I encourage you to take a weekend, or at the very minimum, a half day to go somewhere beautiful and connect with God. At these times, rather than bringing tons of Scripture to read, print a single passage of value, a chapter or so, and

read it over and over again, seeking to go deeper. Pray until you have nothing left to pray, and then focus on the presence of God, inviting God to be near, even if you aren't verbalizing anything. *Resist the urge to be productive, and focus on being present.*



I don't think it's possible never to feel frustration or burnout, but these actions, some of which are occasional, and others of which are regular, have helped me significantly to feel contentment and purpose where I am.

<http://marksadams.blogspot.com/2017/01/how-to-get-fresh-start-without-leaving.html>