

People Are Not Projects

How to keep a Kingdom focus when your people move on
by *Dan Lentz* | posted 11/02/2009

The Conversation

Stewart and Debbie were in the small group my wife and I led for more than a year. Our families really connected and it became obvious Stew and Deb were both gifted for ministry. My wife and I asked them to be apprentice group leaders, and they agreed.

Over time, our group grew and then multiplied. Stew and Deb took over leadership of the original group, while my wife and I launched out to start a new group. Stew and Deb became the solid group leaders I had envisioned them being. Their group grew. They developed an apprentice leader and, eventually, their group multiplied again!

Stew and I kept meeting throughout this time. I was overseeing small groups church-wide back then, and it became clear that Stew had a vision for the overall small-group ministry. I decided to ask Stew to consider moving into a senior leadership position in the larger church, helping oversee small groups along with me. I told him I wanted him to do what I was doing in the near future. I believed that God had prepared him for that role and the church needed his leadership gifts and values. As for Stew, he was humble about the possibility, but he didn't shrink away from it. He clearly had the vision and the heart for the ministry.

We continued to meet. Several months passed until, one day over breakfast, we had "the conversation." "Dan," he said, "we've decided to leave. We are transferring to another church."

If you've been in ministry very long, you've probably had "the conversation" at least once. I pray you haven't gone through it very often, because it is a blow to the gut and it can take the wind out of you for a very long time. I asked Stew why he was leaving. He told me his family needed things our local church wasn't providing. The truth was his family did have very legitimate special needs, and the truth was that we couldn't provide for some of those needs in our current structure of ministry.

My initial reaction was all too typical. I wanted to say: "Why are you leaving, really!? Did I do something or say something that made this happen? Why haven't you talked to me about this before now? I've invested so much time in you and your family just to have you walk away?" Indeed, these experiences do bring you face to face with your own weaknesses and insecurities as a leader.

After talking to Stew more, I realized this wasn't a rash decision. Sometimes you can talk people through it and change their minds, but other times they've been thinking about it under the surface long enough that there's no turning back. I knew Stew's decision was made, and now I needed to figure out how to react to this new reality.

How to Move Forward

Here's what I'm learning about these situations. When someone we've been discipling decides to move on, it doesn't really matter what their reasoning is. Stew's decision could have been anything legitimate: "I'm switching jobs and relocating," or "The church is going in a different direction than our family is going," or "God is calling me to do something different." You fill in the blank. Regardless of the reason, the real issue involves getting past our own expectations and agendas to see where the Lord is still at work. As leaders, we must see our relationships and ministry to one another as more important than success at our "ministry job."

Believe me, there are still organizational things we need to do in these situations. There are feelings to deal with and tough conversations that have to happen. But at some point in the process it's important to get past ourselves and realize: "This is not about my efforts or success. Stew is not my 'project.' People are not projects!"