

Pastoral Ethics and Leave-Taking

Toward a Pastoral Ethic Upon Leaving a Congregation

*The following draws heavily upon an Alban Institute publication by Edward A. White—**Saying Goodbye: a Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors**—a helpful resource for those wishing to review this topic further.*

PASTORAL ETHICS

Changing Roles

When a pastor leaves a congregation, members may feel they have lost a trusted friend. Like the eternal presence of God, the presence of God's ministers takes on an aura of permanence, and members are surprised and hurt when the relationship must end. The break is often as hard for the pastor as for the congregation.

It is extremely difficult to shift roles. The pastor ceases to be the pastor and a friend, and becomes friend only; members cease being one's flock and friends, and become friends only. Relationships must be redefined apart from the ecclesiastical roles. The pain of such change only compounds the sense of mutual loss and grief.

Making Contact

Before a pastor's departure, it was customary for members to seek (and for pastors to give) friendly concern, sympathy, visits, cards, letters, hospital calls, sacramental services, taped sermons, and conversation about the congregation's life and future. After the pastor's departure there is often a persistent tendency to continue these contacts as if to "hang on" to each other and to the good that was. These contacts very often occur in a covert way, as

through it is not OK for the new leaders to know about them, since continuing contacts are private matters "just between old friends."

A member in contact with a former pastor, however, generally focuses individually on that relationship and may not see how maintaining that connection affects other members or impedes developing a healthy and proper relationship with the new pastor.

The contact usually takes one of the following forms by retired and former pastors:

- Returning to former congregations to perform weddings, funerals or baptisms.
- Continuing to make pastoral visits on members of the congregation.
- Injecting themselves into the life and problems of former congregations and/or advising members on those issues.
- Criticizing the successor pastor to members of the congregation or becoming the confidant of those who wish to express criticism.

The Problem

The problem may lie in our understanding of the "church." If the church is centered in the relationship of pastor and people, then it might be argued that a pastor's congregation is all those people throughout the land who have come to rely on them as their pastor. But if the church is centered in Christ and a pastor is but a servant of that one Lord, then a pastor's congregation is those who—in this time and place only—have been entrusted to them. It is then an issue of pastoral ethics to fail to recognize that the currently installed pastor of the congregation is

the pastor of the congregation and to undermine that person's ministry is a betrayal of one's ordination vow and the constitutional requirements of the larger church.

"At the time of retirement a pastor is no longer pastor of a congregation and therefore must discontinue the functions of the pastoral office in the congregation unless specifically authorized to do so" (*On Ordained Ministers: Manual of Policies and Procedures for Management of the Rosters*, ELCA, Section III). Furthermore: "A retired pastor should not remain a member of the congregation served at the time of retirement. Transferring one's membership to another congregation allows the successor pastor to assume pastoral leadership more readily" (Section II).

"Ordained ministers shall respect the integrity of the ministry of congregations which they do not serve and shall not exercise ministerial functions therein unless invited to do so by the pastor, or if there is no duly called pastor, then by the interim pastor in consultation with the Congregation Council" (*Synodical Constitution*, S14.14).

Effects of Continuing Contact

Consider what happens when a pastor fails to let go of his/her former pastorate:

- Members delay or deny the necessary grief work and get emotionally "stuck."
- When the congregation must work through a problem, the unseen (or seen) presence of a former pastor complicates the ability to have an open dialog.
- When members turn privately to a former pastor for comfort and care, it deprives the community the opportunity to build the strength that comes from shared struggles.
- Private contacts direct members' energy outside the congregation when that energy may be needed within the community.
- Private contacts encourage "holding on" to the past and fighting former battles; they decrease the congregation's ability to struggle with present realities and create a new future.
- Contacts confuse members about where and how to focus their commitment.
- Private contacts place the resident pastor in the awkward position of interloper.

- By surfacing implicit comparisons between new and old, the new pastor is forced to contend with "ghosts."
- Private contacts keep the new pastor on the defensive and subvert that pastor's morale and effectiveness.

Members are confused. Pastors are hurt. Congregational life may be brought to conflict. And the church's true *passion*—which is to be consumed by the mission of Christ—is diverted instead to personal loyalties and relationships. It is clear that former pastors and members need to manage interpersonal contacts appropriately.

When Asked, What Shall I Say?

The request is common enough, and very powerful, "Pastor, you baptized and confirmed our daughter, we think it would be so very meaningful if you performed the wedding also."

Care must be taken not to put the current pastor on the spot ("I'd be delighted to come back and do your wedding if the present pastor agrees"). Instead, the pastor's response might more helpfully be, "I am honored that you ask, but it really would not be appropriate for me to do the wedding since I am no longer pastor of the congregation. Call Pastor ---; I'm certain he/she will want to celebrate the day with you as your pastor. And I'll be among your guests that day, celebrating with you too."

Similar responses can be offered in the instances of illness, sympathy, or death. A former pastor can respond as any congregational member would: sending a card, writing a letter to the family, calling on the phone, attending the worship, visiting the funeral home.

LEAVE-TAKING

It would not be difficult for clergy to develop destructive or negative behaviors in order to defend themselves or to handle the pain of grief and loss. At a time of transition the pastor may be overwhelmed by feelings of eagerness, anger, or confusion. But publicly wavering on one's decision, or withdrawing the resignation, or being publicly elated at being able to leave, or using the occasion to accuse one's accusers or fault the congregation's circumstances, or

“leaving in the dead of night” can easily have the effect of feeding rumors, stunting the congregation’s emotional processes, or polarizing the congregation. To give pain to others in order to ease pain in oneself is not a reflection of Christ’s love nor the pastor’s vows.

What To Do

Terminating a relationship is not accomplished by an announcement. It is a process—an ongoing sequence of events, feelings, actions, and interactions. Making the decision to leave and announcing it to the congregation is the beginning of the process, not the end of it. The process will continue for the pastor into his/her tenure in the new parish.

The process need not be destructive. The pastor begins by being intentionally and persistently aware of the transitional process and the emotional reactions that accompany it. To do a good and helpful job of “saying goodbye,” the pastor needs to be:

- **Spiritually aware:** This is clearly a time to operate out of a rich personal spiritual life. Taking a spiritual retreat, listening for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, asking for ongoing prayer support, studying again the pastoral epistles to find guidance in ministry, or seeking out a spiritual director can be very helpful.
- **Clear about Timing:** Notice of departure needs to be given to the chief lay officer first, then the congregation council, then the whole congregation. Thirty days in advance is adequate; sixty days is too much. Clergy who are preparing to retire may make their announcement of departure earlier, but still not more than three months in advance.
- **In Touch with Their Moods:** Don’t be driven by emotions that are beyond immediate awareness and control.
- **Open to Sharing Pertinent Information:** Let the congregation know what is happening and how the busyness of transitioning is going; be open about the ambivalent feelings that may be present.
- **Clear About Boundaries:** Maintain appropriate communications, but keep them focused on the day-to-day operations of the congregation. Do not attempt to help them

initiate a Call Committee or the Call Process.

- **Requesting an Exit Interview:** A pastor can “tie up loose ends” and help a congregation consider its future by offering some careful, thoughtful, and constructive comments about the opportunities and challenges of the congregation in the coming years. To do so is not a boundary violation. A consultant who is a fellow pastor can facilitate the interview and will probably be more objective if he/she does not live in the same community with you.
- **Grateful:** Be thankful in an abundant and honest fashion for the love and support of the people. Accept their appreciative comments and gifts graciously. Acknowledge the accomplishments that have occurred in the years of your service. Maintain integrity and authenticity.

Termination Tasks

When a pastor says good-bye there are five termination tasks, four of which are similar to the task confronting a person near the end of life.

1. The need **to take control** of what remains of “this life.” The pastor needs to be intentional about using the time between the announcement of the resignation and the actual departure to bring closure with the various individuals and groups in the congregation. Saying good-bye may be an almost full-time job for the duration of the pastor’s time in the congregation.
2. The need **to get affairs in order.** Responsibilities must be turned over to others so that the life of the congregation can continue decently and in order.
3. The need **to let old grudges go.** That may mean visiting with people with whom there had been differences at one time or another. The ability to “begin well” (for either the pastor in a new location, or for the congregation with its new pastor) is largely a consequence of having “ended well.” Good closure involves processing the feelings that might otherwise become the emotional baggage of the next relationship.
4. The need **to say “thank you.”** It is unfortunate that all people so often fail to express appreciation until the end is near.

But that is why it is ever so important to at least do it then.

5. The need **to be straight and clear about reasons for leaving.** Nature abhors a vacuum. If a person is not clear about the reasons for leaving, people will fill the vacuum with their imaginations. What they imagine will invariably be worse than the reality and may initiate unfounded feelings of anger or guilt.

Letters of Agreement

Some pastors have found that there is great wisdom in helping their congregations be very aware of the way the relationship between pastor and people is changing. The clarity helps in the grieving and healing process and makes it more likely that the congregation will be able to turn in anticipation and readiness for the next chapter of its history. To document and declare the changing relationship, Letters of Agreement may be helpful.

“As part of the bishop’s pastoral care of retired pastors, a synodical bishop or a member of the bishop’s staff is encouraged to meet with a pastor at the time of retirement to discuss these guidelines, the pastor’s new retired status, and its implications” (*Retired Pastors in the ELCA*, a statement adopted by the Conference of Bishops).

Accepting the Challenge

Every pastor and lay rostered leader in the synod is challenged to live up to the highest standard of personal, professional, and moral ethics. Rostered leaders are not unaccustomed to the fact that in so doing they will experience tension and ambiguity in their decision-making, relationships, and behavior. These guidelines are offered to help the leadership be aware of the issues, dynamics, and requirements of being faithful stewards of their office.

Your bishop and synod staff welcome your conversation and concerns as you seek to live a life fully worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

Bishop Sue Briner
Southwestern Texas Synod, ELCA
1090 Oestreich Drive
Seguin, Texas 78155-3403
830-379-9900
sbriner@swtsynod.org

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To the Departing Pastor

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Also enclosed:

Sample Letter of Agreement

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