

ETHICS OF TRANSITION

The following is a reprint from Bishop Rogness of the Greater Milwaukee Synod of the ELCA. It concerns the ethics involved with the resignation of one pastor and the calling of another.

The sensitive matter is of pastors being asked for pastoral acts by people who are their former parishioners.

We start with the acknowledgment that there is no painless way out of an awkward situation. A good pastoral relationship is not coldly functional but is personal, as well, so it's not at all uncommon for people facing a wedding, funeral, baptism, etc. to desire the presence of a pastor who has been personally important in their lives. So you who have been good pastors, and you lay folks who have tied good pastors, can expect that those times come when you'd like the pastoral relationship to continue for a special occasion. That's where we run into troubled water. The professional ethic we need to be clear on is this: when a pastor leaves a parish, he or she is no longer those people's pastor; he or she may continue to be a friend, but the pastoral relationship has ended. The implications are clear: it is often (though not always) appropriate to do what other friends do - attend a wedding or a funeral, for instance - but the pastoral act of presiding in those moments belongs to the current pastor.

At times the interim pastor or the new pastor may call on the former pastor to let that pastor know of something happening, or, on a few occasions, to say a few words at a funeral, but remember they are no longer the pastor. The responsibility belongs to those of us who have left to make clear that the pastoral relationship has ended.

We want to do what we are trained to do, especially when special people value our doing it; but as clergy who are accountable to each other, as well as to the whole church for the effective ministry in each place, it is of paramount importance that we do all we can to support the pastoral relationship that is in place.

Former Pastors: Respond automatically by saying, "It's simply not appropriate for me to do that. I'm not your pastor anymore, but I'm glad you consider me a friend. I'd love to come if invited, as your other friends do." But don't say, "You'll have to talk to your pastor about that." That's often said, perhaps thinking that such a response respects the current pastor's role. It doesn't. It puts the current pastor in the no-win situation of acceding to the parishioner's request and relinquishing the pastoral role to you, or saying no and being regarded by the parishioner as cold, jealous, unresponsive and uncaring. Simply say that it's not your role anymore.

Current Pastors: Speak as affirmingly as possible of the relationship your predecessor has had with parishioners, but don't relinquish your pastoral role. When you feel it's appropriate and healthy, you may invite the previous pastor to participate in a secondary way, but the pastoral role and its responsibilities are yours.

Parishioners: Don't even ask. It immediately puts both the current and former pastor in very awkward positions. Even if a former pastor lives down the block and the current one is someone now that you hardly know, you affirm your former pastor best by inviting him or her to come while showing high regard for the pastoral office he or she held by seeking out the new pastor to be your pastor.

This may sound arbitrary and legalistic. We don't mean it to be; we mean it to be pastoral, in the best sense of the word. We all encounter situations we think are 'exceptions.' We think there are a few of those, but probably a lot fewer than we think at the time.

And then there are more "gray area" kinds of contact with former pastors over personal life struggles, complaints about the life of the parish, etc. But the same principle applies: We no longer are our former parishioners' pastors, and we serve our friends. our former parish, and the whole church best by making that clear and by being highly supportive of our successors, We best honor both their ministry and our own by doing so.

We think most pastors are very clear about these matters most of the time, but we're all human enough that an occasional reminder is probably good for all of us.