



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 may be surprised or 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. When leaving a call, a 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 though 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. To undermine that person’s ministry, even in small ways, is to betray one’s ordination vows 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, S14.19).

Effects of Continuing Contact

Consider what happens when a pastor fails to let go of his/her former pastorate, through maintaining regular connection on social media, email, in person or through the mail:

- 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 content 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 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 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 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. Relationships need to be honored. Time thanking individuals and the congregation will need to be taken, and taken before the rite of farewell. This internal process will continue, of course, for the pastor into his/her tenure in the new parish or retirement, and for the congregation in their journey into the future. The process need not be destructive. The pastor begins by being intentionally and persistently aware of the transitional process and the emotions that accompany it.

With the departure of the former pastor, primary responsibility for oversight of the relationship between the congregation and the former pastor (including his/her family members) becomes that of the Congregational Council, even after a new pastor is called and installed. It is thus incumbent upon the Council leaders to continue to communicate and interpret this separation ethics policy to the congregation. If violations occur, the Bishop may be invited to intervene and discuss the departing pastor’s continuing status on the Roster of Pastors and Deacons.

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 may be appropriate; six months is too much. Clergy who are preparing to retire may make their announcement of departure earlier, but still it is advised that under most circumstances it not be more than four months in advance.

- **In Touch with Their Moods:** Don't be driven by emotions that are beyond immediate awareness and control. Assure members that even though you won't be in touch, you will be praying for their congregation, church, and members.
- **Open to Sharing Pertinent Information:** Let the congregation know what is happening and how the busyness of transitioning is going. Spend time with individuals and with small groups. Prioritize relationships in this season. Be open about the ambivalent feelings that may be present.
- **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. Maintain integrity and authenticity. Acknowledge accomplishments. Allow the congregation the experience of celebrating Christ through your ministry with them. A helpful ritual for the last Sunday before leave-taking is "A Liturgy of Departure," https://swmnelca.org/Call_Process/Step_1/Step1b_LiturgyforDeparture_Pastor.pdf
- **Clear About Boundaries:** In this season just before departure, maintain appropriate communications. Focus on next immediate steps for you and your family, the congregation and the day-to-day operations of the congregation. Explain that a leader from the Bishop's Office will accompany them during the Transition Time. Do not attempt to help them initiate a Call Committee or the Call Process. This is the work of the Bishop's Office and a Transition Pastor or other Rostered Leader. Consider a newsletter to educate the faith community about separation ethics, and why clear boundaries are important for their life together.
- **Clear About Social Media and Online Boundaries:** Though difficult, it is recommended as a best practice for the departing pastor to unfriend/unfollow all congregants and others with whom they've had a pastoral relationship, although there may be situations where using restricted lists is appropriate. In making this change to limit online interactions with former members, pastors prioritize the needs of the congregation and incoming ministerial leadership over their own desires to maintain relationships (or the desires of congregants to stay in contact). Pastors must be consistent with all –either unfriend/unfollow everyone from the

congregation or move everyone to a restricted list -and convey this policy to their congregation as part of their departure plan so there is no confusion.

- **Communicative About Boundaries:** Set clear expectations in newsletters, worship and adult forums about the future, and the need for clear disengagement for the sake of the life of the church. "I will miss you and pray for you, but you are Christ's church, not mine." Space must be allowed to develop between departing pastor and members, so that the necessary process of grief and healing and openness to new ministry may begin. This is not just faithfulness; it is a requirement.

Sample Newsletter Article for Congregation

God's Present, God's Future

As you no doubt know, Pr. _____ has discerned a call to _____ (retire, take a call in Indiana, etc.). Our prayers and gratitude go with _____ (her/him/them).

Because we want everyone to be aware of some important issues related to the transition between pastors, what experts call "separation ethics," we ask you to read this carefully.

The Church Council and departing Pastor have agreed to the following, and seek your cooperation, regarding the positive future relationships among us:

We will do everything possible to uphold the mission of the _____ Church and the positive quality of life in this congregation.

We will recognize the need for time to adjust to the new relationships and will reach out in care and compassion to one another.

We will honor the departure of the former pastor so duties may be relinquished.

We will accept that Pr. _____ is expected to disconnect from social events, pastoral care and social media with our congregation and its members for the foreseeable future to create space for both pastor and congregation, and for all the emotions we will be feeling.

We will honor the arrival of the interim/transition pastor by acknowledging their role as Minister of Word and Sacrament, and by seeking their counsel and leadership. We are aware that conducting pastoral acts (such as baptism, weddings, funerals, confirmations, communions) and defining ministry programs and leadership styles are no longer the prerogative of the departing pastor but belong to the transition pastor and newly called pastor with the Council and congregation.

We will, after our interim journey, honor the arrival of the newly called pastor by acknowledging their role as Minister of Word and Sacrament, and by seeking their counsel and leadership. We are aware that conducting pastoral acts (such as baptism, weddings, funerals, confirmations, communions) and defining ministry programs and leadership styles are no longer the prerogative of the departing pastor but belong to the transition pastor and newly called pastor with the Council and congregation.

Termination Tasks

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

- ☑ **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.
- ☑ **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.
- ☑ **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.
- ☑ **The need to say, "thank you."** It is unfortunate that we 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.
- ☑ **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 or anger or guilt.

LETTER 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, please complete the following letter of agreement in partnership with your Congregation President and submit to office@oregonsynod.org.

SEPERATION LETTER OF AGREEMENT

This is a Letter of Agreement at the time of retirement or resignation between Pastor _____ and the congregation council of _____ Lutheran Church, _____, Oregon. It is a clarification of the former pastor's role in relationship to this congregation. It is to be shared throughout the congregation, preferably posted and via newsletter, so that others may understand changes in responsibilities and can work together as the congregation and former pastor move into another phase of their respective lives.

1. The pastor's resignation, effective _____, signifies his/her/their understanding that all pastoral, priestly, and administrative duties in this congregation are terminated as of that date.
2. It is mutually understood that this termination of responsibilities applies also to the interim period before another pastor is called, since the congregation needs some time and space between pastors to discover who they are now, where they want to go, and with what new leadership. It is agreed that the congregation council will make provision with the Bishop for interim pastoral ministry for the congregation.
3. The former pastor agrees that he/she/they will not officiate or assist at any baptism, wedding, or funeral in this congregation, but may attend as a worshipper on occasion. They will communicate health updates and prayer requests through the interim pastor or newly call pastor. This is to prevent divided loyalties in the congregation and pressures on either the former or future pastors or interim pastors. The former pastor may be called on as interim or supply pastor in other congregations on rare occasion.
4. The former pastor agrees that he/she/they will not continue to make pastoral visits on members of the congregation. Communications regarding life, illness, or changed circumstances will go through the interim or called pastor. Personal relationships with members of the congregation will be stopped, as will all interaction with church members on social media. Circumstances may make it necessary for an exception for limited involvement in the following instances:
 - a) _____
 - b) _____
5. The former pastor agrees further that if attending this congregation in the future, it will only be after three years have passed, and as worshipper and participant. He/she/they will neither say nor listen to any uncomplimentary or critical remarks in social or other gatherings concerning the interim, past, or future pastors.

6. The former pastor will not do services (wedding, baptism, funeral, etc.) unless it is at the specific initiation and request of the current pastor and/or council (rather than member).
7. If, after three years, there is a desire on the part of the next pastor to review any of the above items, the former pastor pledges to accept the guidance and instruction of the next pastor and congregation council about any participation in the life of _____ Lutheran Church.
8. The former pastor will remove his/her/their vestments, equipment, books, and possessions by _____. Email lists will be deleted. All items belonging to the congregation will remain in the congregation. Keys to the buildings will be returned to the church office, no later than _____.
9. By _____ the pastor will transfer administrator duties for church-related social media spaces and accounts (remove their administrator status, share passwords with someone else in the congregation, who in turn changes the passwords and assumes administrator duties).
10. Within one day of departure, the pastor will unfollow/unfriend members on social media for at least three years. After three years, departing pastors may discern whether they will begin to accept friend requests of former congregants and/or choose to change their privacy settings. They should not initiate friend/follow requests with former congregants, and they must continue to refrain from providing pastoral care to former congregants.

"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints."

Colossians 1:3-4

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.

With gratitude for your service and the many ways you to continue to bless God's church and this world.



Bishop Laurie Larson Caesar, Oregon Synod, ELCA

Retiring Pastor: _____

Congregational President: _____

Bishop: _____

Date: _____

"This then may be our final act of ministry in a congregation.

*We may be able to model for them ways in which they can gain closure... It is an art for
which we've had little or no preparation...*

*To model effective closure involves being able to live deeply into the human side of death--
the death of relationships--the death of roles and functions and responsibilities--the death
of that special relationship a pastor has with a parish...*

*At times we may discover ourselves having more difficulty letting go of the role...than the
people themselves..."*

*from Roy Oswald's "Running Through the Thistles: Terminating a Ministerial Relationship
with a Parish" from Alban Institute (1978)*