

CHAPTER 3: The Current Pastor Resigns or Retires

The Exit Evaluation and Interview -- The Termination Date -- The Farewell Celebration -- Liturgy for Departure of a Pastor from a Congregation -- Completion of Obligations -- Future Pastoral Acts of Former Pastors

When the pastor resigns or retires, the primary concern for many congregations is to find a new pastor quickly. No one can guarantee how long the call process will take. Most congregations greatly underestimate the time needed for completion of the call process. Congregations are encouraged not to hurry the process of calling a new pastor. There is work to be done to lay a sound foundation for the next chapter in the congregation's life. The next chapter will explore more fully the dynamics present for an effective period of "interim ministry". In this chapter we give attention to the leave-taking of the pastor whose ministry is ending.

The Exit Evaluation and Interview

No one is in a position to have come to know the congregation from the intimate perspective of the pastoral office as has the pastor who is leaving. Both the congregation and the synod are well-served to explore the insights that pastor has to share as she or he takes leave. It is also a time for the congregational leadership to become more fully aware of dynamics that might affect the next pastorate, both positively and negatively. It is a conversation held in gratitude, honesty and charity.

Both the pastor and the council leadership should take the time to look back and reflect on the ministry. The Exit Evaluation Forms on the next page can be used for this process. The material is then shared at an exit interview between the Congregation Council and the pastor and the Synod staff person.

The Process:

- Expect to meet about 1 hour.
- Choose a site that is comfortable and non-threatening, the Congregation Council meeting area for example.
- Adopt the attitude that this should be a positive experience, both in terms of the reflection that will be undertaken and the insights which will be gained about the future.
- Begin with prayer and/or devotion.
- Synod staff will lead the meeting, using a structured format.
- Council members should be ready to comment, follow up on comments, reinforce, clarify, etc, saying, in effect, "Here is something I can add..."
- Be attentive to both the intellectual and emotional content.
- Honesty, candor and respect should characterize the meeting. This is not a time to "vent". It is an opportunity to rejoice in the ministry which has been completed and begins to anticipate the future ministry.

- Following the direction of synod, the process may vary from the structure to allow for spontaneous discussion relevant to each interview's specific context.
- After the interview has been completed, the process ends with a closing prayer.
- Careful notes should be taken, to be shared with a Call Committee, the synod staff, and perhaps even the pastor(s) being considered for call. The event should be given structure, but not to the extent that free and open dialogue is inhibited.
- If for some reason the pastor is unable to be present, we recommend that the exit evaluation process be completed without the pastor.

EXIT INTERVIEW FORM

(Pastoral Response)

(Photocopy-ready copies are in Chapter 12/Appendix, one copy for each participant, one copy to be the official record.)

Pastor: _____

Person filling out the form: _____

1. What were the compelling reasons that attracted you to accept the call to this congregation?
2. How did your expectations of ministry here compare to the realities of your ministry here?
3. What things have given you the sense of greatest fulfillment? (With which things are you satisfied and pleased?)
4. What things have given you the sense of greatest frustration? (With which things are you unsatisfied/ dissatisfied or displeased?)
5. What do you consider as the strengths of the congregation?
6. What do you consider the weaknesses of the congregation?
7. What present areas of ministry and program do you think should be retained and continued?
8. What new areas of ministry and program do you think should get emphasis in the future?
9. What do you think that this congregation can do to strengthen and support the incoming pastor?
10. What would you like this congregation to do to help you and your family in the transition soon to take place?

11. Are there any critical issues or ongoing concerns that should be addressed in the near future?

EXIT INTERVIEW FORM

(Congregational Response)

(Photocopy-ready forms are in Chapter 12/Appendix, one copy for each participant, one copy to be the official record.)

Congregation: _____

Person(s) filling out the form: _____

1. What were the compelling reasons that attracted the congregation to call this pastor to the congregation?
2. How did your expectations of the pastor compare to the realities?
3. Regarding this pastoral ministry: What things have given you a sense of greatest fulfillment? (With which things are you satisfied and pleased?)
4. Regarding this pastoral ministry: What things have given you the sense of greatest frustration? (With which things are you unsatisfied/dissatisfied or displeased?)
5. What do you consider the strengths of the congregation?
6. What do you consider the weaknesses of the congregation?
7. What present areas of ministry and program do you think should be retained and continued?
8. What new areas of ministry and program do you think should get emphasis in the future?
9. What do you think that the congregation can do to strengthen and support the incoming pastor?
10. What would you like the pastor to do to help the congregation in the transition soon to take place?
11. Are there any critical issues or ongoing concerns that should be addressed in the near future?

The Termination Date.

When a pastor accepts a new call, the pastor will normally notify the congregational leadership first, then the congregation through a letter to all members. Normally the termination date is approximately 30 days from the time of announcement, and any accrued vacation is taken at the end of the tenure. (For instance, if a pastor announces her leaving in early September and has two weeks vacation accrued, the pastor may announce "My resignation will be effective October 30, with the last two weeks of October taken as vacation. My last Sunday will be October 16." The congregation pays all salary and benefits through October 30, though all expenses (car allowance, etc.) would end as of October 16.

The Farewell Celebration.

A congregation will want to arrange with the pastor a time to celebrate and give thanks for the years of ministry together. Often this takes place on the final Sunday. It is often appreciated that others of the pastor's family and ministry colleagues also be invited.

Liturgy for Departure of a Pastor from a Congregation

When used as part of the Sunday Service, to be used following the Prayers of the Church; at other times, it can be used in conjunction with Responsive Prayer II, after the Evening Prayer before the benediction.)

The Pastor (P), a Representative of the synod/cluster designated by the Bishop (B), and a Representative of the Congregation (R) come forward.

R: Pastor N_, on _____, we called you to be our pastor: to proclaim God's Word, to baptize new members into the Church of Jesus Christ, to announce God's forgiveness to us, and to preside at our celebration of the Lord's Supper. With the gospel you have comforted us in times of sickness and trouble, and at the death of our loved ones. Sharing our joys and sorrows, you (and your family) have been important to our life together in the Church of Jesus Christ and in our service to this community.

You have served our congregation faithfully _ years. You are now leaving our midst to [become pastor of ____]. As your fellow members of this congregation we wish to honor your ministry among us and bid you farewell and Godspeed in your new endeavor, bringing closure to your ministry at _____.

P: I thank the members of ____ Lutheran Church for the love, the kindness and support shown to me (and my family) during active ministry among you. I ask forgiveness for the ways I have sinned against you. I am grateful for the ways my ministry has been accepted. As I leave, I carry with me all that I have learned here.

C: We receive your thankfulness. We offer you our forgiveness and accept that you now leave to resume your ministry [in another congregation]. We express our gratitude for your time among us. We ask forgiveness for the ways we have sinned against you. Your influence on our faith and faithfulness will not leave us at your departure.

P: I forgive you and accept your gratitude, trusting that our time together and our parting are pleasing to God.

B: Do you, members of ____ congregation, release him/her from the duties as pastor?

C: We do, with God's help.

B: Do you offer encouragement for his/her ministry as it unfolds in his/her new [congregation]?

C: We do, with God's help.

B: Do you, Pastor ____, release ____ congregation from turning to you and depending on you?

P: I do, with God's help.

B: Do you offer your encouragement for the continued ministry here?

P: I do, with God's help.

B: On behalf of the Greater Milwaukee Synod I witness to the words spoken here: words of thankfulness, forgiveness, and release. We will hold you in our prayers as you begin your ministry at ____ [*or as you retire*]. We pledge our support and love to you and wish you God's blessing.

R: Let us pray: God, whose everlasting love for all is trustworthy, help each of us to trust the future which rests in your care. The time we were together in your name saw our laughter and tears, our hopes and disappointments. We give you thanks for the countless ways our lives have been woven together in the tapestry of your church. Guide us as we hold these cherished memories, but move us in new directions, until that time to come when we are completely one with you and with each other; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C: Amen.

R: Let us bless the Lord.

C: Thanks be to God.

R: The Lord bless us, defend us from evil, and bring us to everlasting life.

C: Amen.

The peace is shared.

Completion of Obligations.

The ELCA constitution indicates that the pastor is responsible for maintaining congregational records. Similarly, the second statement certifies that there are no outstanding financial obligations of either the pastor or congregation. Both forms are to be filled out and returned to the Synod office as the pastor leaves..

(A) see appendix for "Certification of Completion of Congregational Records"

(B) see appendix for "Certification of Completion of all Financial Obligations"

Future Pastoral Acts of Former Pastors

One of the most commonly troublesome issues in ministry is the matter of former pastors continuing to perform pastoral acts for former parishioners. It is unethical for pastors to do so, but in any given instance it seems so natural and even desirous. The following is offered as a newsletter piece or bulletin insert to be used shortly after the pastor's departure. (See also Chapter 12/Appendix for an example of a letter written by a retiring pastor to his congregation.)

AN OPEN LETTER OF PASTORAL ADVICE - from former Bishop Peter Rogness

The following was originally published in a 1993 newsletter of the Greater Milwaukee Synod, and has been widely reproduced (most recently in the May 1999 issue). It is intended to give guidance to pastors and congregations alike.

WHY NOT ASK OUR FORMER PASTOR?

(An Open Letter of Pastoral Advice from Bishop Peter Rogness)

With our synod being as geographically compact as it is, we often face the matter of pastors who have moved from one congregation to another being asked for pastoral acts by people who are their former parishioners.

There is no painless way out of an awkward situation. A good pastoral relationship is not coldly functional; it is personal as well, so it's not at all uncommon for people facing a wedding, funeral, or baptism to desire the presence of a pastor who has been personally important in their lives. Good pastors can expect that times will come when former parishioners would like the pastoral relationship to continue for a special occasion.

*That's where we run into trouble. We need to be clear on what has come to be understood as a "professional ethic" for pastors: **when a pastor leaves a parish, she/he is no longer those people's pastor; he/she may continue to be a friend, but the pastoral relationship is ended.** The implications for pastors are clear; it is often (not always) appropriate to do what other friends do - attend a wedding or funeral - but the pastoral act of presiding in those moments belongs to the current pastor.*

I still live in the house I moved to in 1975 to be pastor of Hephatha Church, 1-1/2 miles away, so I know the awkwardness. I've found the most helpful response to be something like, "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."

I don't say, "You'll have to talk to your pastor about that." That would put the current pastor in the no-win situation of relinquishing the pastoral role to me or saying no and being regarded by the parishioner as cold, jealous, unresponsive and uncaring. So I simply point out that the pastoral role isn't mine anymore.

So what's the best way for all concerned to handle this? I would advise that you or lay members don't even ask - it immediately puts both the current and former pastor in very awkward positions. Even if the current pastor is someone that you hardly know, you affirm your former pastor best by inviting her/him to come while showing high regard for the pastoral office he/she held by seeking out that new pastor to be your pastor.

I don't mean this to sound arbitrary and legalistic. I mean it to be pastoral. I'm sure there may be a few situations that are "exceptions", but probably a lot fewer than it seems.

There are also contacts with former pastors over personal life struggles, complaints about the life of the parish, etc., but the same principle applies: we honor our former pastors most highly by recognizing the importance of the work they do and the office they hold by looking to current pastors for those ministry acts.

Call Process Manual

Greater Milwaukee Synod

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