

"Ethics... A Sensitive Matter"

The sensitive matter is of pastors being asked for pastoral acts by people who are their former parishioners. With our synod being as geographically compact as it is, we may face this issue more frequently than other parts of the church.

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/whatever 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 had 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/she is no longer those people's pastor; he may continue to be a friend but the pastoral relationship is ended. The implications are clear: it is often (though not always) appropriate to do what other friends do - attend a wedding or 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 is ended.

We want to do what we're trained to do, especially when special people value our doing it; but as clergy who are accountable to each other, and 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 parishioners 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. Where 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 new that you hardly know, you affirm your former pastor best by inviting him to come while showing high regard for the pastoral office he held by seeking out that 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 are no longer 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.

(A reprint from Bishop Peter Rogness of the Greater Milwaukee Synod)