

**GUIDELINES FOR PASTORS AND
CONGREGATIONS
REGARDING PASTORAL RETIREMENTS
Presbytery of the Western Reserve**

The Committee on Ministry is increasingly aware that pastors and congregations are often uncertain regarding what should be expected in their relationship following the retirement of a pastor. Questions often come as to what continued activities are appropriate and what the expectations ought to be on the part of the congregation or the retiring pastor. How these matters are dealt with is extremely important for the continued vitality of congregations and for the enjoyable and meaningful retirement of pastors. Clarity about these issues is essential if the decision to retire is to be fully respected. Where there is lack of clarity, misunderstandings and tensions can arise, which can cause great difficulty. These guidelines are offered as counsel and advice in order to help create healthy and supportive post retirement relationships.

EARLY CONSULTATION

As soon as a pastoral retirement is contemplated, the pastor is asked to consult with representatives of the Committee on Ministry. This will enable the Committee to provide guidance and support for the planning which will need to take place including advance work with the Board of Pensions. It will also enable Committee on Ministry representatives to confer with the session to guide the planning necessary for the closure of a pastor's ministry and the preparations for the next stages in the life of the congregation and the pastor. The Committee on Ministry needs to have at least six months lead time prior to a proposed retirement date and would welcome having even as long as a year in advance for such consultations. The Committee on Ministry should be consulted prior to the sharing of plans with the session.

RETIREMENT PLANNING

From time to time the Presbytery will be sponsoring seminars and other events related to the planning of retirement for pastors often using the resources of the Board of Pensions. The Committee encourages all pastors to take advantage of these opportunities, even those in their 50's, for whom retirement is some years away.

WHAT RETIREMENT MEANS

Retirement means relinquishing all pastoral duties related to the church from which the pastor is retiring or any other church served in the past. Otherwise no true retirement is achieved. One retired pastor reports having received and appreciated this very good advice from a friend, "If you are not yet ready to relinquish your pastoral responsibilities, you are probably not ready to retire." Retirement does not necessarily bring the end of all forms of ministry. An Honorably Retired pastor remains on the active role of the presbytery. Even in retirement, pastors often serve many years in interim, stated supply or pulpit supply positions.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE PASTOR EMERITUS/EMERITA

Our Presbyterian Form of Government provides a way for a congregation to provide a special honor to a retiring pastor. A congregation may recognize the retiring pastor's service with appreciation and in a formal way by electing him or her to the status of Pastor Emeritus or Emerita. The Form of Government, Sections 14.0605 and 14.0606, carry the official description of this relationship. This is an honorary relationship and carries no pastoral authority or duty. The Pastor Emeritus/Emerita has no responsibility in or to the congregation, nor should he or she play any role that might influence the continued life and ministry of the congregation. It can be difficult for former pastors to avoid conversations and actions that might have such an influence, particularly if they remain in the community. Most retired pastors report that they find considerable relief and comfort in the way the Form of Government describes the Emeritus role. It enables them to make polite but firm refusals to engage in conversations with members of the church, which might overstep the intended bounds represented in this section of the Form of Government.

Having said this, it needs to be acknowledged that there are many occasions in the life of a congregation when it is appropriate for former pastors (whether emeritus/emera or not) to be invited back. This includes times such as anniversary occasions and other special events that recall the history and heritage of the congregation.

CONCERN FOR THE CONGREGATION'S FUTURE MINISTRY

The primary concern of all – retiring pastor, congregational members, and the Presbytery – should be that a retirement is carried out in such a way as to support the continued strong ministry of the congregation. That concern centers in the establishment of a new pastoral relationship that is allowed and encouraged to become as strong and as healthy as the previous pastorate or pastorates through the years. We often speak of how important the early months and years of a new pastorate seem to be, especially in terms of the bonding which takes place between the pastor and the people. That bonding emerges out of the pastoral care experiences the new pastor has with the people and families of the congregation, especially in the experiences they have together in events such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Thus it is especially important that the new pastor's leadership in these roles not be hampered in any way. Yet this can be the case when members seek to arrange for the former pastor to continue to serve them in these pastoral roles. What those who make such requests do not realize is the extent to which they are implying that the new pastor is not really their pastor. Such requests can also infringe on the rights of the retired pastor. They are often quite difficult to refuse without seeming to be at least impolite if not contrary. Such requests are inappropriate even when the current pastor is an Interim or Stated Supply, for those pastorates are the bridge from one leadership to another and such times are preparations for the new.

The Form of Government does not contain a provision which may seem to imply general approval or acceptance of continued service by a retired pastor. Section G 14.0606 specifies that former pastors (which would include retired pastors) may officiate at services for members of a church only upon invitation of the moderator of session or in the case of inability to contact the moderator or the clerk of session. What that provision deals with is the minimum of common courtesy in arranging such service. It also clarifies the authority resting with the new pastor or moderator of session. At the practical level, however, that provision often places a difficult burden on the new pastor. It is very hard to refuse any such requests, even though that may be the strong preference, without appearing to be ungracious. Once a former retired pastor has responded to one such request it is difficult to draw the line on additional requests as they emerge. This is particularly true in relation to presiding at funerals of long time members.

Retired pastors who have been the most effective in dealing with this sensitive matter report that they have simply informed the congregation at the time of their retirement that they will not be available for any continued pastoral services. They refer all such requests to the new pastor and refrain from placing the burden for permission on the new pastor.

Essentially what church members are being reminded of, with this advice, is the importance of taking their retired pastor's retirement seriously. They are being encouraged to realize that part of their appreciation for his or her long years of service is being willing to let go and to offer good wishes for the retirement years, but not to request future pastoral services.

APPROPRIATE ROLES FOR RETIRED PASTORS

Retired pastors often become a very valuable and treasured resource for the presbytery in which they are serving. Their long years of experience and their perspective and knowledge of the church can be an invaluable help to the life of the presbytery in many ways. The nominating committee of the presbytery rejoices in being able to deploy these veteran leaders in service on appropriate committees of the presbytery. They often have more time available than pastors in active service and their knowledge of the church and their experience in carrying out many of the responsibilities of presbytery committees is of great value.

In a similar way, the Committee on Ministry often depends on being able to have the services of retired pastors available for pulpit supply and to serve as interim pastors or stated supply pastors. Today many retired pastors are securing additional training regarding the special aspects of serving as interim pastors, making themselves even more valuable for guiding churches during this vital period in their lives.

The question often comes, "Is there no appropriate role at all for a retired pastor to play in relation to the church formerly served?" Situations vary greatly and there may well be certain situations and certain individuals who can continue to have some relationships which refrain from impinging on the development of the new pastoral relationship. Refraining from carrying out pastoral services does not need to be seen as a necessity for breaking off friendships that have been established over many years. Such an expectation would be unrealistic, even inhuman. Retired pastors and their spouses will undoubtedly want to maintain some friendly relationships with persons to whom they have become attached over the years. Such activities as visiting in the hospitals "as friends," and responding to other natural social invitations can often be done without risk to the new pastoral relationship. The key in these matters is for those involved to direct the conversations and sharing of information and memories in such a way that the retired pastor and spouse are protected from any likelihood of influencing the direction or decisions of the church following a retirement.

In this regard, where the retired pastor and spouse should worship comes into consideration. It may be advisable that during the early years of retirement, the retired pastor and spouse find a new church home. They should be encouraged to find a place where they could become active in the congregation's life and regular in attendance at worship. This is admittedly a difficult experience in many cases. Yet those who have succeeded in making this adjustment report that they are satisfied with the wisdom of this advice in the long run. They see themselves better able to continue to be active in the life of a church with no risk of impinging on the rights of the new pastor and the congregation formerly served. This step also enables the retired pastor and spouse to avail themselves of a full range of pastoral services and care in the new congregation as well as making a helpful contribution to its life. If the spouse does continue as a member in the church from which the pastor retired, it is important that he or she support and encourage the ministry of succeeding pastors.

CONTINUING FINANCIAL AND PROPERTY TIES

At the time of retirement many congregations present gifts to the retiring pastor. Such gifts often include money gathered within the congregation, enabling the members to express their appreciation in this tangible way. Following retirement, however, congregations are not expected and should not continue financial support. The church's pension program, the government's social security plan and the pastor's own retirement planning should be sufficient to meet retirement needs. This is true also with regard to providing continued housing in any form. Pastors ought not to expect further generosity of this kind. Continued financial or property ties with a retired pastor can have a detrimental effect on the development of the new pastoral relationship. Congregations need to use their continuing resources for the current and future needs of the church.

A SUGGESTED PATTERN FOR RETIRED PASTORS TO FOLLOW

The key to making an effective retirement adjustment for the pastor and the congregation seems to rest in the ability of the pastor to state clearly his or her expectations and intentions at the time of retirement. It would be wise for the pastor to make public statements from the pulpit, in the newsletter, and at retirement events to provide the clarification that is needed by all involved. This could include making clear that while friendship ties remain, the congregation is not to request continued pastoral services. The retiring pastor could indicate to the members that he or she would respond to invitations to be present as a friend at baptisms, weddings and funerals, but that no effort should be made to invite them to provide pastoral services in those events.

CONCLUSION

As pastors move toward retirement, they and their spouses often confront many mixed emotions and considerable uncertainty regarding what retirement days will involve. The counsel in these guidelines has hopefully provided the kind of advice which can support their being able to experience many enjoyable years of retirement, while seeing the churches formerly served also prosper in their new pastoral relationships.

The Committee on Ministry always stands ready to talk with pastors and/or their spouses during and after the retirement process to provide helpful assistance as they make the adjustments to a new life with new goals, friendships and opportunities for service. The Committee on Ministry encourages pastors and spouses to call upon this assistance.

*Committee on Ministry
Presbytery of the Western Reserve
January 1989
Revised April 1996*