**Is “Stay Away” the Only Way?: How Former Pastors Relate to Congregations They Previously Served**

**by Trish Towle Greeves**

A colleague once told me about interviewing some years ago for a campus ministry position. His eligibility was expressly predicated on his not talking to any of the clergy who had previously served in that position.

Another colleague recalls a seminary professor’s admonition to students that when called to a parish, they should not be in touch with their predecessors—to avoid any preconceived notions about the setting and parishioners they would soon be encountering.

My friend Paul still regrets not attending the funeral of his lifetime mentor because it was being held at a congregation Paul had once served as pastor.

Congregational members have shared with me their tendency to not mention events related to former pastors in front of the current pastor, sensing that such conversation would not be welcome.

In a *Christian Century* “Faith Matters” column, M. Craig Barnes expresses his conviction that we must always relate to former parishioners as “pastor, not friend.”1

In his book *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors*, Alban Institute consultant and author Ed White cautions that continuing contact between former pastors and congregations inhibits the congregation’s grief work, encourages “futile grappling with ghosts,” promotes rivalries among members, diverts energy outside the congregation when it is most needed within the community, confuses commitment to new leadership, and “keeps the current minister on the defensive and places her or him in the awkward position of interloper.”2

In light of such examples, I have wondered whether by emphasizing what former clergy are not to do, we are causing:

1. Unnecessary pain from the complete rupture of relationships between former pastors and parishioners
2. Loss of collegiality between former and successor pastors
3. Loss of goodwill and sense of well-being by preventing a continuing but transformed relationship between congregations and former pastors
4. Unnecessary ambiguity and secrecy when former pastors do maintain contact with some former parishioners

As part of a doctor of ministry thesis project, I designed a research project to explore if, when, why, and how a visible relationship between former pastors and congregations can or should exist. I researched success and satisfaction with pastoral transitions in congregations from the perspectives of members, former pastors, interim pastors, and successor pastors. Using a web-based tool, I created the Pastoral Transitions Survey to examine respondents’ emotions and satisfaction, the relationship between former and successor pastors, the public engagement of former pastors with congregations they previously served, friendships between former pastors and congregational members, and adherence to professional boundaries.

All mainline denominations have similar ethics pertaining to the relationship between pastors and congregations they previously served. These guidelines require the pastor to terminate all pastoral services, refrain from interfering in the life of the parish or the ministry of the successor, honor the record of one’s predecessors and successors, and exercise caution regarding contact with former parishioners.

These boundaries are rightly designed to foster a successful transition, particularly to assist the congregation in accepting new pastoral leadership and to ensure its readiness and commitment to move into the future. The importance of keeping these boundaries was recognized by all 78 survey respondents. After a well-celebrated ministry and specific closure date, a former pastor should, in their words, “move on,” “stay away,” “give room,” “not linger,” “make a clean break,” “stay out of church’s hair,” “remove [oneself] physically and emotionally,” and so forth. Interim and successor pastor tributes to predecessors who did this well further underscore how important these boundaries are.

On the other hand, the survey high- lighted a desire for some sort of continuing relationship between congregations and former pastors. A significant number of comments pertained to this need. The following chart summarizes the common positive and negative arguments concern- ing ongoing relationships between congregations and former pastors.

Clearly, no consensus exists concerning ongoing relationships with former pastors that would fit all pastoral transitions. However, in the absence of unethical conduct and assuming a voluntary departure, and in spite of legitimate fears of the slippery slope, my analysis of statistical and anecdotal data from the surveys suggests five areas of continuity between former pastors and congregations can be affirmed: (1) maintenance of institutional memory and goodwill; (2) occasional visits for services and special events; (3) shared times of bereavement; (4) collegiality between former and successor pastors; (5) continuing friendships with some congregational members.

**Maintenance of Institutional Memory and Goodwill**

Former pastors are part of a congregation’s history. Often pictures of them hang on a wall somewhere in the church. Their pastorates are noted when the congregation’s histories are updated. Congregational newsletters include updates in a former pastor’s personal or professional life, such as a new call or a significant health issue. When one former pastor was called to a conference ministry position, the congregation where he had served many years before incorporated his most frequently used benediction into the Sunday worship service and prayed for his success on the day he was being installed in another part of the country.

When I was diagnosed with cancer and about to have surgery to remove a kidney, I made a coffee date with my successor, who was then beginning the sixth year of her pastorate following my sixteen-year tenure. She included a note about the surgery in the next congregational news- letter. I was subsequently showered with cards and notes of love, concern, and good wishes, which gave me great pleasure and support.

Beyond the essential tasks for a successful pastoral transition—letting go, building new relationships, and setting new directions, an enduring bond of affection and good will remains between pastors and parishioners who have sojourned together, sharing life’s deepest questions, sorrows, hopes, and joys.

**Occasional Visits for Services and Special Events**

Former pastors are typically invited to participate in special occasions such as anniversaries, building dedications, and reunions. These events celebrate the ongoing life of a congregation within a larger framework that transcends any particular pastorate. The presence of former pastors or members of their families representing many years of a congregation’s pastoral leadership embodies the hymn refrain:

Forward through the ages in unbroken line,
Move the faithful spirits at the call divine.

The most frequent services attended by former pastors, according to the Pastoral Transitions Survey, were funerals, followed by an occasional visit to a Sunday service, and then weddings. The average number of times former pastors appeared for any reason in a congregation they had previously served was slightly over two a year. This figure did not distinguish between former pastors who had retired and those who were working in another setting. Eighty percent of former pastors said they were present once a year or less often. One or two visits a year for any reason appeared to be beneficial for all concerned.

**Shared Times of Bereavement**

A clear exception to the “clean-break- stay-away” policy that was mentioned in the survey by respondents from all role perspectives concerned the death of long- time members in the congregation. A representative sample of survey respondents’ own words conveys this sentiment:

A successor pastor wrote, “I would re-look at rules in place (i.e., no showing up for funerals, etc., for a few years) and re-write them to include the option of occasionally doing that.... [To not do so] seems non-compassionate.”

One interim wrote that she “never draws a line with the former pastor when there is a death of a church member and encourages the former pastor’s presence at the memorial service if he/ she desires to be present.”

One successor pastor shared about the growth in her own awareness when she at first discouraged her predecessor from attending the funeral of a beloved patriarch of the church. “After talking to a colleague who was an experienced interim, I called the former pastor back and invited him to come. This was a good decision all around.”

A former pastor wrote, “I would like to see the guidelines for transitions have a more nuanced understanding about some of the complicated situations that can arise. There was, for example, the death of a church member when the church had no interim pastor; inviting the former pastor to preside would have been comforting to the family and not have compromised the overall transition.”

An interim pastor wrote, “I believe that any future involvement is not best achieved by a rigid rule. At times of family stress, such as funerals that occur during the interim period, many families express a desire for some contact with the former pastor, and I believe it is appropriate for me to reach out to the former pastor on behalf of the family to set up some appropriate involvement.”

One of several congregation members who expressed similar sentiments wrote that it seemed “appropriate and helpful for former ministers to attend funerals.” Another respondent wrote of her disappointment when her dearly loved pastor of some twenty years did not attend her husband’s funeral.

A successor pastor in referring to his predecessor wrote, “She has rigorously stuck to the boundaries defined by the conference, and in some instances, I think these are too strong. I would want her to have been free to come when beloved members have died.”

This wide consensus drawn from unsolicited comments was striking. It convinces me that this is an important area that needs to be thoughtfully considered, particularly by successor pastors who best know under what circumstances the former pastor’s presence would be called for and who are the appropriate initiators of such an invitation.

**Collegiality between Former and Successor Pastors**

At least 50 percent of all clergy respondents were very satisfied with their working relationship with the other pastor involved in the transition, and at least 95 percent of the interim and successor pastors were at least okay with that relationship. A few former pastors, however, recalled much better relationships with their predecessors in previous transitions and had hoped for that kind of relationship with their successors and former congregations when they themselves left.

I computed a former/successor engagement score based on the type and frequency of contacts between former and successor pastors to look more closely at these relationships. The average score for former pastors and successor pastors was nearly three times the average score for interim pastors, perhaps because there is more time for the longer-term pastors to develop a relationship.

For former pastors, there was a strong correlation between the former/successor relationship score and their overall satisfaction with the transition. For interim pastors, there was a very small correlation between the former/successor relationship score and their overall satisfaction with the transition. For successor pastors, there was a small negative correlation between the former/successor relation- ship score and overall satisfaction with the transition. Although it is important to remember that correlation suggests some kind of relationship or influence but in no way proves cause, the former/successor relationship is clearly more important to former pastors than it is to interim or successor pastors.

When asked if there were specific courtesies or actions performed by their colleague—predecessor or successor— that the respondent would recommend to other pastors, successor pastors most appreciated:

* The former pastor’s support for the successor’s ministry, demonstrated in actions such as leaving a file, making introductions to people, conveying a public attitude of approval, offering advice when asked, serving as a consultant when needed, and being clear about plans and intentions
* Maintaining good boundaries by not interfering, refusing requests for pastoral services, and calling ahead of time when coming to the congregation
* Former pastor appreciated actions such as these:
* Being called about deaths of long-time members and staff
* Experiencing some collaboration in the transition process and having the opportunity to offer clarification and support to their successor
* Being invited and welcomed on occasion to participate in an event at their former congregation

**Continuing Friendships with Some Congregational Members**

As highlighted by the numerous responses to Barnes’s “Pastor, Not Friend” column, continuing friendships is a dicey issue. Responses to the Pastoral Transitions Survey suggest that pastors are commonly friends with former parishioners. The average former pastor has about six close friends from her former parish. These appear to be a natural extension of friendships developed during a pastorate and do not seem to be a problem for either congregational member or successor pastor respondents, as long as the former pastor’s new role is understood and good boundaries are maintained regarding the current life and leadership of the congregation.

Although only former pastors were asked about continuing friendships, a number of comments by other respondents reflected general acceptance of these relationships. Contrary to the wisdom I have inherited and much of the literature I reviewed, congregational members in this survey did not seem to resent the fact that their former minister occasionally sees other members as friends. They seem to take that for granted. One member who was “highly satisfied” with the transition wrote:

I have not had any engagement with the former pastors in my church setting, although I have seen one of them in other settings and have heard about her life from people who were better friends with her than I was. These communications were entirely private and appropriate, as this former pastor is well aware and schooled in boundary issues.

Another member respondent who is friends with a former pastor of her congregation wrote, “I do have an ongoing relationship with the former pastor but never discuss the current pastor.” The most memorable comment from all the surveys was, “Whenever asked about the congregation, the former pastor always responds, ‘Isn’t it a beautiful day?’”

Successor pastors also did not seem to experience stress about these relationships, as noted by this suburban pastor: “The first long-term pastor ... remained somewhat in contact with a few members of the church. This was not deleterious to the ministry of the church.” An interim pastor commented, “There may be some communication from a long distance but not in any way that is interfering in the life of the congregation.”

All such acceptance evaporates when the former pastor does not scrupulously maintain pastoral-transition boundaries. Unbounded personal relationships with former members can cause great harm to congregations and successor ministries, which is, I suspect, why a more cut-and- dried, “no contacts” interpretation of the guidelines is tempting.

So how do we respond to the friends- with-former-members quandary? It depends. It depends on the health and maturity of the pastor and those with whom she or he is engaged, and how well the necessary boundaries are understood and followed by all concerned. It depends on the nature, history, conduct, and focus of the friendship, and the member-friend’s relationship and commitment to the congregation and its new leader. Such friendships can probably never be without risk and misunderstandings. Attempting to follow a blanket “no contacts” policy, how- ever, also involves losses, costs, and pain for all concerned.

**Final Words**

Every pastoral transition involves a unique history, present circumstances, and personalities. Although policies and procedures are essential for effective planning, administration, and training, they need to be thoughtfully, not blindly, applied. Openness and clear communications build trust, reduce anxiety, and engender support. Triangulated inquiring, sharing, and advocacy are deadly.

Professional competence and personal self-awareness are critical for successful pastoral transitions. Stated conversely, no number of wise policies, good intensions, and careful preparations can protect a system from the damage inflicted by uninformed, unskilled, self-absorbed, hostile, or mentally unstable participants. This reality underscores the importance of denominational screening and monitoring of authorized ministers in the congregation and the promotion of healthy behaviors in every aspect of congregational life, including the relationship between former pastors and congregations.

**Notes**

1. M. Craig Barnes, “Pastor, Not Friend,” Faith Matters, *The Christian Century*, January 9, 2013, [www.christiancentury. org/article/2012-12/pastor-not-friend](http://www.alban.org/www.christiancentury.%20org/article/2012-12/pastor-not-friend).

2. Edward A. White. *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors* (Washington DC: Alban Institute, 1990), 98-99.

3. Frederick Lucian Hosmer, “Forward Through the Ages,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, #555.

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