

On The Ethic and Boundaries of Clergy Transitions

[This document from the Diocese of Ohio may be helpful in parishes that are experiencing transitions.]

As clergy, we are bound together by our common mission to reflect God's merciful heart in a broken world. Our pastoral work is to be an expression of our own grateful, free, and joyful encounter with the compassionate God.

To be merciful as God is merciful means to follow the mind of Christ by relating to others in servanthood and humility. As deacons we promise to help and serve those in need. As presbyters we are asked to be faithful pastors to all whom we are called to serve.

The purpose of this letter is to address the sensitive and sometimes difficult issue that arises when clergy are invited into a pastoral role by a person or persons who are no longer directly under their pastoral care.

It is important that we have a common understanding of the boundaries inherent in pastoral care and essential that we model healthy relationships in all of our congregations.

When a deacon or priest leaves a congregation, the pastoral relationships that were formed there are over. It is increasingly clear that sometimes this circumstance can become a problem. Transitions are difficult enough, but they are complicated when we are not able to let go of one another.

Inherent in every pastoral relationship is a personal relationship. The integration of our role as pastor on the one hand and our identity as a friend in Christ on the other goes to the very heart of how we understand and experience our work as ordained people. The lines between the two are often barely distinguishable, and we can find that we function most effectively as pastors with those who invite us into their lives as friends.

Frequently, it is precisely because of an effective ministry that we are invited back into a pastoral role after we have left a congregation. It is only natural for people to turn to someone who has known them, often at the most intimate levels, for support and nurture.

Baptisms, weddings, and funerals are obvious cases where former parishioners can instinctively reach out for clergy who have cared for them in the past. To be called to the bedside of someone who is dying is to be asked to be who we are. These circumstances and many similar ones make it difficult to say "no" easily.

Other situations can raise up the question of whether one is being called as a friend or as a former pastor, or perhaps something of both. For example, what is our appropriate response when a former parishioner wants to confer with us about a personal problem, or to pray, or to talk about her/his life in the Church? Whether we like it or not, we know that parishioners relate to the ordained and ask things of ordained people that they don't ask of others. We cannot forego the identity given to us at ordination. In this respect, clergy might want to answer some questions before leaving a particular parish setting.

How much do I look to my professional life for my personal friendships?

How much of a life do I have outside of the church?

How do friendships in the context of parish community come to be?

Should I continue these friendships after I leave the pastoral role?

What effect does the continuation of friendships have on others with whom I had a pastoral relationship but choose not to continue in relationship as a friend?

There are no certain answers to these questions, but they should be avenues for discernment and part of a pastor's prayer entering transition.

It is best to abide by the general principle that it is inappropriate to provide pastoral care to former parishioners. Of course, there are times when we who are pastors will want to honor friendships for specific and compelling reasons, but these cases will be the exception.

Primarily, the most important relationship in the area of pastoral transition is the one between the former pastor and the new pastor. When this relationship is open, honest, healthy, and mutually supportive, boundary problems will rarely be a problem.

It is the responsibility of the ordained person who leaves a parish to enforce boundaries with former parishioners. It is not fair to put the new clergy person in a situation where he/she has to react to awkward situations that come unexpectedly.

One's response to requests for pastoral care should be clear and unequivocal. "I'm really sorry, but it is not appropriate for me to do that. You must understand that I care for you, but I am not your pastor anymore. I know that the new person will be fully available to you." After such a conversation, it is important for the former pastor to call the new pastor to tell her/him that you were contacted by one of her/his parishioners and how you responded.

Also, before leaving the congregation, clergy should plainly tell the members of the congregation why they will not be available for ongoing pastoral care.

Avoid triangles. One of the unhelpful things a former pastor can say is, "You'll have to talk to the new rector about that. I really can't do what you are asking unless I have the rector's permission." Often we think that such a response is being helpful, but the opposite is true. The response puts the new person in the awkward catch-22 of either relinquishing the pastoral role or not giving permission and thereby being seen as insensitive and uncaring.

It should be noted that if an ordained person wants to return to a former parish for

worship, even in the pew, he/she should notify the current rector prior to coming. Also, it is best not to discuss other parish issues or the personality and style of the new rector with former parishioners.

Most clergy are very clear about these matters. The people we are called to serve will be served when we respect the ethic and boundary of transition by which our common life and ministry are ordered.

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