

## Holding On and Letting Go By Sue Westfall

Pastoral transitions (from the first week the pastor announces his/her departure through the first year of the newly installed pastorate) are some of the most dynamic seasons of a church's life. One of the challenges in such a season is the relationship of the church to the former pastor. It's tricky because, while the role changes, the feelings do not. The same love, trust and affection remain. But then there's Presbytery Policy #3 – "Ethical Guidelines Governing the Relationship Between Pastors and Their Former Congregations."

The first thing you need to know about presbytery policy is that something necessitated its creation. In the case of policy #3, what necessitated the policy were situations where a former pastor - usually for all the good, right, and loving reasons - could not let go of the pastoral role. And if the "beloved former pastor" isn't willing to let go of the pastoral role, the new pastor can't fully step into it. It's just that simple. In these situations, feelings get hurt on all sides, but the real casualty of a pastor's unwillingness to let go of the pastoral role (or the congregation's unwillingness to let them let go), is the ministry of the church, the new thing to which God is calling the congregation.

Policy #3 is seven pages long, but here's what it boils down to:

- Give the new pastor every chance to become your beloved pastor. Invite him to your home. Ask that she visit you in the hospital. Call him in emergencies. Ask her to baptize your baby. Give your new pastor every chance to become your beloved pastor. He/she is the pastor God has called to minister to you.
- The former pastor is going to have to say no – to requests to visit Aunt Tillie in the hospital, to the invitation to the deacon's Christmas party, to the choir's summer barbecue. Do not take this personally. Your former pastor still loves you.
- The policy is not a total ban on the former pastor's involvement in weddings, baptisms, funerals, etc., but here is the absolutely critical key: that involvement must be at the invitation of the session and the new pastor. If you want the former pastor to take part in great-grandma's memorial service, call the current pastor and the clerk of session and ask if they would be willing to invite the former pastor to participate.
- With communication, healthy boundaries and good will, policy #3 is not a burden, but a useful tool for moving gracefully through times of pastoral change.

At the end of the service on the last Sunday of a long, fruitful pastorate, one pastor I know walked to the front of the chancel. Slowly, thoughtfully, he removed his stole, folded it up, placed it on the communion table, and announced, "I am no longer your pastor. Now, we get to figure out how to be friends." It was a powerful symbol of his laying down his pastoral role and authority while acknowledging the affection that remained.

Holding on and letting go. Hold on to the love and gratitude and friendship you have for your former pastor. Let go of the expectation that the former pastor still be your pastor or leader of the church. God has brought you new leadership and the Spirit is moving!