

Letting Go: Setting Boundaries in Retirement and Former Parishes

© 1997

By L. Ronald Brushwyler, D.Min.
The Midwest Ministry Development Service
1840 Westchester Boulevard, Suite 204
Westchester, IL 60154-4334
Chicago • Columbus • Kansas City

John, a retired pastor, continues to intrude in a previous pastorate where he had served many years. He contacts families in the church when there has been a death and manages to put himself in a place where he will do the funeral or a major part of the service, overshadowing the present pastor. It has upset the pastor, but the present pastor does not want to create a problem for the bereaved families. John is an overbearing person and just will not let go. He always seems to know how to get to the front of the line.

Charles, a long-term pastor, retired and remained in the community. He has moved his church membership but continues to "drop in" and pay pastoral visits to members as well as conduct funerals and weddings. Charles refuses to listen to complaints from the new pastor, nor does he take the counsel of the denominational official. Living a lifestyle other than an active pastoral ministry is something he doesn't know how to do. The new pastor lasts in the congregation less than two years.

After a long-term ministry, Robert retired and moved a short distance away. During the interim period in his former church, he continues to do funerals, particularly for persons who are loosely connected to the church. When the new pastor arrives, Robert continues to do these funerals, even for persons the new pastor is visiting in the hospital. The new pastor feels she is losing the opportunity to reach nonmembers in the community and form relationships with them on behalf of the church. She talks with Robert but nothing changes. When a denominational official is called in, Robert is defensive and criticizes the new pastor for not being sufficiently involved in the community. Robert sees nothing unethical in doing a funeral for a non-church member in his former community and will continue to do so if he is asked.

Mary, a retired pastor, returns too easily and too often to her former congregation for weddings and funerals. Mary would say, "If you tell your pastor to invite me, I will come," which did not allow the current pastor any options. Consequently, Mary keeps the newer pastor from deepening ties with parishioners at some significant points in their lives.

Finally, Peter, following his retirement to a distant state writes letters of pastoral encouragement to families in his previous congregation when he learns of a death or a crisis through the church newsletter or other contacts. The current pastor sees this as a breach of ethics because Peter is continuing to exercise a pastoral role with his former members; he is not simply involved in a nonprofessional friendship that is no longer pastoral in nature.

These actual situations, which have been carefully written to protect the identities of the pastors, are just a few of the many cases submitted by forty-two judicatory executives who responded to our recent requests for real examples they encountered of boundary violations in retirement. Only one judicatory executive contacted indicated no problem with this type of violation!

Discussion

Gaylord Noyce writes in *Pastoral Ethics*, "When asked what problems pastoral ethics should address, judicatory people and pastors alike name *meddling* as the most troublesome of all. They speak of continued involvement by a minister or a priest in the affairs of a congregation after he or she has left." Noyce rightly points out that our pastoral relationships are deeply personal. Continued contacts often present no problems to our former parishioners; they seem altogether natural. And a former pastor or even a parishioner may intend no slight to the present pastor in their continued ministry contacts.

Often in retirement issues of personal identity and self-worth can intensify for us. This is especially true when we have relied too heavily on our pastoral roles to provide the structure, meaning, and value to our lives. Saying *goodbye* to a role and a way of life which has significantly shaped us is not an easy task.

Insightfully, Roy Oswald points out in *Running Through the Thistles*: "At times we may discover ourselves having more difficulty letting go of the role we played with people than letting go of the people themselves. A symptom of this is the desire to maintain our role throughout the termination process. Dying to the parish involves dying to our role with people as well. Our failure to die to this role with congregational members gets us involved in pastoral acts with them long after we've left. Our hanging onto these roles is our bid for immortality. We allow ourselves to be indispensable with people, insuring our ability to live forever in their lives."

It is essential that we understand that our ordination is for the benefit of the church and her mission in the world. It is not something for our advantage; it is not a personal right or entitlement. We are not ordained to be private chaplains to whomever we please. In Noyce's words, "This rule of nonmeddling is not a mere legalism; it stems from the overriding concern for the church." To undermine another's ministry by the continued exercise of our pastoral role in a former parish is a betrayal of our ordination. It delays and can even weaken the formation of new relationships between an incumbent pastor and congregation and even the wider community.

William Bridges underscores letting go as essential for making a successful transition to the new. In his book *Transitions* he describes several crucial elements of an ending. *Disengagement* is the physical separating or dislocation from the contexts in which we have known ourselves. *Disidentification* is the loss of a previous sense of personal and professional identity which is the inner side of disengagement. *Disorientation* is the period of confusion, uncertainty, and perhaps even emptiness. Taken together these elements have an enormous impact on our inner world. And all these elements affect us in a transition from one parish to another—even more so in the transition to retirement. According to Jules Willing in his provocative book, *The Reality of Retirement: The Inner Experience of Becoming a Retired Person*, it is often unexpectedly

difficult to let go of the roles and power to which we have grown so accustomed. In the midst of our ministries we may take our roles with people for granted and, at times, even feel weary of these roles. However, in retirement we may face a personal emptiness without these roles.

As with other kinds of professional boundary violations, using Marilyn Peterson's criteria (*At Personal Risk*), several key ingredients are usually present. There is a *reversal of roles* in that the parishioner actually takes care of the former pastor by allowing him or her to continue to exercise a pastoral function beyond what is appropriate. Then, a *double-bind* occurs because the parishioner may be caught between offending neither the new nor the former pastor at a time when the parishioner may have real needs for pastoral care. In addition, a *secret* is usually involved. The former pastor is not likely to inform a parishioner about statements in the code of conduct which specifically denounce continued pastoral relationships with former congregations. Neither will the former pastor mention the awkward position the new pastor is placed in when he or she is requested to officially include the former pastor in a wedding or funeral. Finally, a *professional privilege is indulged* when the former pastor uses ordination and the previous relationship with a parishioner as an entitlement for continued pastoral contacts in hospital visitation, weddings, or funerals.

Preventive measures

The retired or former minister needs to take the lead in setting the limits on any continued involvements with previous pastorates. Establishing and maintaining boundaries is not the primary responsibility of former parishioners or the present pastor. Several preventive steps can be taken to minimize the risks of violating professional boundaries in retirement or when leaving a congregation for another call.

Begin now to cultivate and nourish friendships and satisfying activities outside your ministry roles. Enlarge your identity beyond your professional life so you are not as dependent on your pastoral role for your sense of self-worth.

Become better informed about professional boundaries. Most of us have to think in ways very different today than when we entered ministry, and rightfully so. Professional boundaries regulate, in healthy and appropriate ways, our interactions and exercise of power with parishioners. Boundaries allow for a safe relationship based on the best needs of a parishioner, not on our personal needs. When we leave a congregation for retirement or to take another position, professional boundaries protect the former congregation from an unethical use of our ministry role. Boundaries facilitate the sensitive and important task of congregational bonding with the new pastor.

Talk with your spouse about the dynamics and ethics of leaving a congregation. Although spouses are not usually hired as professional staff in a congregation, their understanding and cooperation is needed in maintaining appropriate boundaries when leaving. In several cases submitted to us, the spouse continued to play an active role in the boundary violations with a former congregation.

Prior to your leaving, develop a Covenant of Separation in consultation with your church board. This covenant should clearly indicate the ending of your pastoral role and pastoral functions with that congregation, and it needs to be shared with all the members. (Request a sample covenant of separation from any of our Midwest's offices.)

Understand fully what saying "goodbye" means. It means the end of the pastoral role in a congregation. It means any intrusion in a former congregation undermines another's ministry and is betrayal of one's ordination. Ordination is for the welfare of the church and its mission; it is not given to benefit the individual—it is not our personal right or an entitlement.

Our stories need not be those of John, Charles, Robert, Mary, or Peter. Letting go of our ministries gracefully and humbly with a congregation affirms that ministry is much larger than our own efforts and needs. It is an affirmation of the continued movement of God's Spirit through persons other than ourselves. It even prefigures our final willingness to let go of life here and embrace the ultimate New Beginning.

Selected Bibliography

William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, Reading, PA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1980.

Gaylord Noyce, *Pastoral Ethics: Professional Responsibilities of the Clergy*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988.

Marilyn A. Peterson, *At Personal Risk: Boundary Violations in Professional-Client Relationships*, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992.

Wm. Bud Phillips, *Pastoral Transitions: From Endings to New Beginnings*, Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1988.

Edward A. White, *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors*, Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1990

Jules Z. Willing, *The Reality of Retirement: The Inner Experience of Becoming a Retired Person*, NY: William Morrow & Co., 1981.

L. Ronald Brushwyler, D.Min., is Executive Director of Midwest Ministry Development Service and has been a staff member since 1977. He is available to conduct workshops on professional boundaries with clergy and seminary groups.

<http://www.midwestministry.org/letting-go.html>