

Ministry Issues

THE CLERGY RETIREMENT CHALLENGE: STAY IN THE COMMUNITY OR LEAVE?

by Marvin G. Albright

More and more, retiring clergy are choosing to continue living in the community where they have served, particularly those who have had long pastorates. Most probably would prefer to abide by the unspoken and sometimes written rule "to get out of town" to allow for a smooth leadership transition. Others might find it difficult to make such a drastic change at this stage of their lives. Clergy retirement has its own peculiar set of challenges, including limited financial resources, increasing physical debilities, family considerations, emotional attachments, and, of course, the desire to remain as active as possible doing what they were trained to do.

When I retired, after having served 30 years in one parish, I had every intention of moving out of town. We did, in fact, leave for nearly two years before deciding to return to make Sedalia our retirement home. Sedalia, after all, was our home! Our children were born here and spent their entire lives in the community. My wife taught in the public schools for nearly 20 years. My life was intricately intertwined with the people of the church and the community, having served on city boards and having initiated the development of several community projects. The church was our spiritual home.

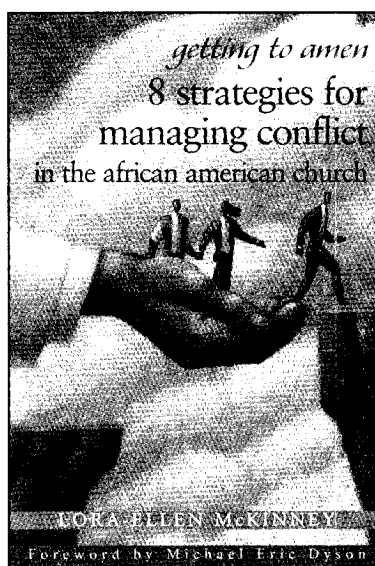
The Challenge of "Letting Go"

I understood the suggested protocol about "letting go" of congregational business, but in retrospect, I don't think that the congregation had the same understanding. After our return to Sedalia, they bestowed the title of "pastor emeritus" upon me. Some folks sensed that this meant I would be like an associate pastor who could "help out" whenever the need arose. The pulpit was still vacant, so naturally there

were occasions when a need presented itself. With what seemed logical justification, I must confess that on occasion I did succumb to the congregation's requests.

I was beginning to realize the inherent problems of my presence and how difficult it is for a congregation to progress with a former pastor in their midst.

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What are those inherent problems? For the congregation, it was obvious. After 30 years under one leader, it was hard for them to let go, or know where to go when there was a need. All programs and progress tended to be measured in terms of the past. Any deviation from that norm appeared to dishonor the ministry of the retiree. This, of course, had an inhibiting effect on progress for new clergy leadership.

It almost goes without saying that problems in letting go exist for the retiring pastor as well. How does one say "no" to pastoral requests without conveying an "I don't care" attitude? How does one allow friendships among some former

future and invited them to maximize the use of their talents and abilities. She activated the Pastoral Relations Committee, encouraging its members to be a liaison between the clergy and congregation. She helped the congregation to begin looking at their future without their former minister. Having done that, she then invited me to sit with her and discuss the implications of being pastor emeritus and living in their midst.

We gave ourselves the task of writing a paper that addressed these new relationships, and eventually handed it to the Pastoral Relations Committee for study and input. We said that the title "pastor emeritus" should be seen as honorary with "no

under new leadership. The temptation to "be in charge" is past. But, there is still an uneasiness on our part. Embracing parishioners who have not been seen in months – engaging in conversation with them about their lives and their families – seems to suggest a pastoral connotation.

There are still personal attachments, which result in requests to perform specific ritual functions. While my relationship with the new pastor is good, I still harbor thoughts of how he perceives such demonstrations of affections and if they hinder his efforts to establish good pastoral relationships with the congregation.

Healthy Relationships

I am confident that relationships between a former long-term pastor and a new spiritual leader can be a positive experience, but it is not easy. I affirm the right of a long-term pastor to remain in her or his community of service. However, I also reiterate that it is not easy. It isn't that retired pastors can't accept the fact that the mantle of leadership has passed to another. It isn't that we can't get along with new clergy leaders. It isn't that we are jealous of new programs. It has to do with how parishioners perceive us. Loyalists want to compare what is with what was. Antagonists might see progress and ask, "Why didn't we do that when...?" Belief in the Gospel is the common denominator in healthy relationships between retired clergy and new pastors. It keeps a person from gloating with pride or cringing with remorse, and allows one to simply be. Retired pastors and new clergy leaders can live and work together when the cause for which they labor is bigger than they are. All live by God's grace; therein lies our hope.

– Marvin G. Albright is pastor emeritus at Immanuel United Church of Christ in Sedalia, Missouri.

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PROBLEMS ARISE WHEN THE CONGREGATION HAS A HARD TIME OF "LETTING GO," AND THE RETIRING PASTOR HAS A HARD TIME "SAYING NO."

parishioners to continue without having those friendships interpreted by others as being pastoral in nature? How does one distinguish between what is a friendship relationship and what is a pastoral relationship? How does the retired clergy and spouse have their spiritual hunger fed if they are discouraged from worshiping in a former parish? How does one remain objective and aloof from conflicts while maintaining a collegial relationship with the new clergy leader?

Aware of how our presence could be exploited and the anxiety we had in dealing with the nagging questions about our role, we were determined that our presence would not stand in the way of any new clergy leader. With deliberateness we did not involve ourselves in the life of the congregation for nearly four years, choosing at times to worship in churches miles from home.

Pastor Emeritus

Meanwhile, conversations with our skillful interim helped to ease my anxiety. She first led the congregation through a grieving process, which helped them celebrate the past ministry without appearing to negate it. She pushed them to see their

entitlements." We affirmed that all activity, such as visiting in the hospitals, nursing homes, or individual homes, should cease so as not to send mixed messages to parishioners about pastoral leadership. Pastoral authority for the incoming clergy leader was to be affirmed and publicly supported. The Ministerial Code of Ethics would be the foundation for maintaining a high level of respect and collegiality among colleagues.

It's too early to know how the contents of this paper will impact the congregation. It did give me the chance to re-evaluate the role that my wife and I have in the community. It reaffirmed the value of establishing and maintaining good collegial relationships. Hopefully, it will be the catalyst for educating the congregation about when to let go, when to move on, and how to act in between. And, hopefully, it will provide a mechanism for handling potential problems.

A new pastor has now assumed leadership in our congregation. Our work in a neighboring community has ended. We have returned to worship regularly with the congregation. New programs and new faces are evidence to us that the congregation is willing and able to move ahead