

Special Feature

PROTOCOL FOR LEAVING AND ARRIVING AT A PARISH

Adopted by the Bishops of the Northern and Southern Provinces

Editor's Note: This statement was reviewed and affirmed at the Eleventh Interprovincial Conference of Bishops of the Northern and Southern Provinces meeting at Home Church, Winston-Salem, N.C., July 18-21, 2002 and was sent as a recommendation to the Provincial Elders' Conferences, North and South. It was given to The Hinge in the hopes that it would stimulate discussion and reflection on an important but often neglected aspect of parish life. At the moment, this statement is advisory, but it reflects the wisdom of the bishops who have dealt with this issue as pastors and as pastors to pastors. Readers, lay and ordained, are encouraged to send their responses to this protocol to The Hinge.

Introduction

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 describes one of life's challenging rhythms. There is a time to plant and a time to pull up, a time to break down and a time to build up, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together. Such vivid imagery describes the experience of a clergyperson arriving to become pastor of a congregation, and a clergyperson leaving her or his post as pastor.

As challenging as is the arrival with all of its getting acquainted energy, the process of up-rooting from what has become known, familiar and generally comfortable, to be re-rooted in a new community as the new pastoral leader of the congregation, is the process of leaving a parish, experiencing separation in putting behind all that has become a part of the relationship as pastor and people. The recognition and acceptance that "I am no longer the pastor of this church family" or "she/he is no longer our pastor" is at times difficult to achieve. Yet, at stake is the integrity of our relationships with one another and the challenge to be appropriate and responsible in the transition. No matter what the situation, whether it be a pastor who is called to another congregation, resigns or retires and leaves parish ministry, elected to a position of leadership in the denomination, or is removed as pastor, we experience a mixture of emotions, including sadness, disappointment, some resentment and maybe even anger, but also joy, happiness or satisfaction. With the announcement of the pastor's leaving a significant grieving process is set in motion. The challenge is for pastor and people to proceed through this process of separation with a high level of integrity and responsibility, utilizing and following the Provincial Elders' Conference's suggested guidelines and protocol for leave-taking. What follows is directed more toward leaving a congregation, for this is where the boundaries are often confused and lines of integrity are breached, often with confusion, pain, resentment and alienation.

The Difference Between Arriving and Leaving

While this may appear rather elementary, the potential entanglement of emotions when pastors leave and arrive demands that we carefully line out the issues and state expectations.

When a new pastor arrives the dynamic is one of welcome, expectation and anticipation for both the pastor and the congregation. Hopes are usually high and the energy of the church community can be equally high. Congregations and pastors know quite well the rhythm that includes everything from installation Sunday to all the getting acquainted rituals.

Not so when the pastor leaves. Here an entirely different set of emotions is experienced with the congregation and pastor entering new territory, one that at times can become a potential minefield. It is a minefield marked with all kinds of questions: Does the former pastor come back for weddings and funerals? Is it appropriate for the former pastor to come back and visit in the congregation? Is there a problem with continuing regular contact with certain former parishioners? Should a pastor reside in the same community in which she/he lives after leaving a congregation? Should former pastors continue to participate in the life of the congregation they have just left? What about membership in one's former parish when one continues to reside in the community. How should the former pastor handle criticisms of her/his successor, and likewise, how should be new pastor respond to criticisms of her/his predecessor?

This document attempts to answer those questions and offer guidelines for the former pastor, new pastor and the congregation. Compliance can lead to healthier relationships, as well as maintain a strong sense of loving integrity between pastors, the congregations they serve, and their colleagues in ordained ministry.

Leaving One Parish for Another

In addition to information given to local congregations by the Province/District Executive Board informing them of the process that occurs when their pastor announces she/he is leaving, it is important for the Provincial/District President and the outgoing pastor to clearly communicate additional guidelines. In bulletins, the newsletter, and in personal conversations, the clear message to be given is, "When I leave this parish, I will no longer be your pastor!" "For the good of us all, there needs to be a significant time of separation, and I will not be coming back to officiate at weddings, funerals and baptisms." As one pastor brought his pastorate to a close but was continuing to live in the community, he included this in the church newsletter: "It is very important that the final day of ministry here be considered a complete severance from all pastoral duties."

Granted, it is normal and natural to want to keep in touch, and yes, to return to one's former parish carries a kind of excitement. But for at least the first year, the former pastor should not return in any official capacity to allow time for separation to occur.

Are there exceptions? It seems that there are always exceptions to be considered and each should be negotiated between the Provincial/District president, the Joint Board of the congregation and the pastors involved. Regardless, the issues that exist are, "What kind of message is the pastor giving to her/his new parish by continually returning to the former congregation?" "Might it be saying that our new pastor has not fully arrived to become our pastor?" Equally impacting is the message being given

to the former congregation that says, “I’m not going to leave you; I’ll come back and take care of you.” When this occurs, everyone is caught in the middle of the minefield. The question pastors must ask themselves is, “Whose needs are really being met?” “Is this simply satisfying my ego needs?” Pastors do have choices. Right choices serve to maintain a spirit of integrity and responsibility.

Another question that may arise is, “What about keeping in touch with former parishioners through letters, e-mail or by phone, especially when they are raising church concerns with the former pastor?” Other than thank you notes in response to farewell gifts and expressions of kindness, it would be far healthier to stay away from these contacts for the first year to enable everyone concerned to experience the process of disengagement. Again, the boundary line must be maintained that says, “I am no longer your pastor; you really need to talk with your new pastor or a member of the board about those concerns.”

The Former Pastor Continuing to Reside in the Community

This is an area that raises another set of questions, including “Should the pastor reside in the same community where she/he served when their call to that congregation has ended?” “Should the former pastor continue to relate to her/his former church and how?” “Should she/he and the family continue as members?”

Generally speaking, there is no reason why the former pastor can’t continue to live in the same community where they served, as long as certain boundaries are maintained. The former pastor and family should not participate in the life of the congregation for at least the first year, providing time for appropriate separation, allowing for full disconnection, and for the new clergy to settle in and become pastor. Negotiations for future activity or membership in the congregation can take place after the first year, including determination of what role of ministry the former pastor might be able to offer in ways that are mutually beneficial for all concerned.

Other Related Issues

What happens when the new pastor is approached by a parishioner and says, “Pastor, if you really want the real story around here, I’ll be glad to tell you;” or, “You know, there is something you really should know about our former pastor.” These two statements represent equally dangerous minefields and should cause red flags to fly.

Rule # 1: First and foremost, we call one another to a high degree of mutuality and sensitivity toward both the incoming pastor and family, and the pastor and family who leave.

Rule # 2: Be cautious when a parishioner conveys the notion that they have the real scoop. One can listen and say, “Thank you. I’ll take it under advisement along with the opinions of others.”

Rule # 3: Refuse to listen to stories about the former pastor. Remember, there is a new pastor in the parish you have just left behind and how would you want her/him to handle criticisms of your ministry? One might say to the parishioner, “You know, Pastor _____ is my colleague and it isn’t helpful or healthy for us to be discussing criticisms of her/him unless there is something you need to get off your chest.”

Conclusion

What is at stake in this rhythm of pastoral moves is maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the Body of Christ. Pastors and congregations are to model for each other what it means to be Christ's community, exercising sensitivity, a loving and caring spirit, and a reconciling heart. Let this document then serve as the plumb line to guide us through the rhythms of planting and pulling up, breaking down and building, mourning and dancing, in ways that can lead to healthy relationships with one another as pastors and congregations.

Summarizing the Essential Guidelines

A reading of life in the New Testament Church suggest, even demands guidelines that maintain the integrity of the pastoral office and our life together in congregations. Anticipating the pastors leaving and that first year of separation, the following guidelines are offered:

1. The Provincial Elders' Conference/District Board communicates to congregations and pastors "The Protocol for Leaving a Parish."
2. The clear message is given by the pastor, written and orally, "I am no longer your pastor."
3. The pastor shall clearly indicated, "I won't be coming back to officiate in any way."
4. If there are exceptions, they must be initiated by the current pastor and negotiated between the Provincial/District president, joint boards and both pastors.
5. The pastor and spouse will not keep regular contact with former parishioners.
6. The new pastor will develop skills to appropriately and healthily deal with parishioners as they speak of the former pastor.

Submitted by the Rt. Rev. Paul A. Graf.