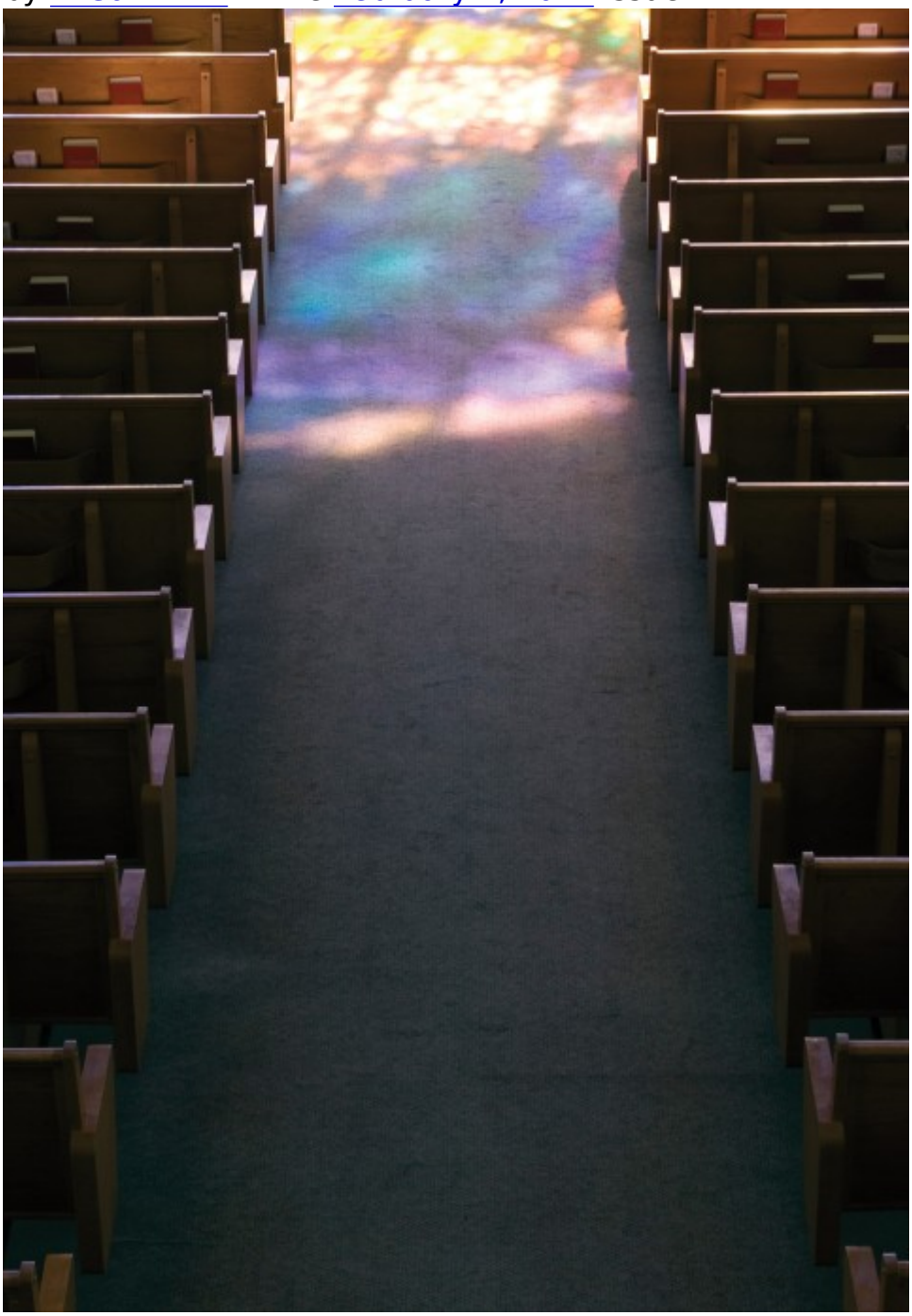
Can retiring pastors mentor their own successors?

Now that 60 is the new 50, creative models are emerging for ministry transitions.

by L. Gail Irwin in the February 1, 2017 issue



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After 40 years of ministry, the pastor of a small, rural church was starting to show signs of forgetfulness and disorientation. He was dearly loved by his parishioners, and no one wanted to talk to him about retirement. But as time went on, he grew more frail and sometimes became disoriented in the pulpit. Finally, the lay leaders went to denominational officials to report that they were no longer being spiritually fed. They needed help figuring out what to do next.

Denise, a pastor and a member of the denominational committee overseeing ministry, decided to stop in on a Sunday to see for herself how things were going. As she settled into a pew, the pastor recognized her and asked, “Why don’t you come up to the pulpit and preach today?” Denise happened to keep an emergency sermon in her car, so she ran outside to get it. The church’s pastor sat with her in the chancel, led the pastoral prayer, and warmly thanked her after the service.

The congregation begged her to come back the following week.

For the next year, Denise arrived every Sunday equipped with a sermon. She would invite the pastor to join her in the chancel and he would climb up the chancel steps, assisted by his daughter. As the service progressed, she would invite him to lead the prayers. Sometimes, he would stop in the middle of a prayer and turn to her, asking her to take over. After the benediction, she would help him walk down the aisle.

At no time did anyone ask the elder pastor if he wanted to retire. The congregation continued to compensate him, in addition to paying Denise as the supply preacher. Eventually, he stayed in his pew during worship and let Denise lead the services on her own.

This congregation’s approach to dealing with its pastor may have been a bit awkward; certainly it was very generous. The story underscores how clergy retirements are fraught with emotional issues, for pastors and congregations alike. It’s an intimate profession, and this intimacy can lead clergy to violate professional boundaries at the end of their career. The congregation is often the location of their vocational call, their social circle, and their financial security. They may have no clear route to retirement, and even when they do retire, they may face difficulties letting go of their church families and their pastoral roles.

A wave of clergy retirements is occurring as the baby-boom generation ages. According to the Lewis Center for Church Leadership, the median age of United

Methodist clergy hit 56 in 2016, the highest in its history. Other denominations are facing similar trends. Along with the surge of retirements come questions about healthy ways for clergy to bow out of spiritual leadership. Should we quit while we still have energy to reconnect with family after a life of working overtime? Should we bolster our retirement savings by working into our seventies? And are there other options for older clergy who, with lengthening lifespans and professional vigor, may be ready to slow down but not ready to quit?

Some denominations encourage or require retired clergy and their families to make a clean break from previous pastorates, avoiding pastoral duties unless invited by the new pastor. An interim pastor is often sought to help the congregation assess its ministry and leadership needs without the interference of a previous leader. This approach has been the preferred model of pastoral transition since the early 1980s, when specialized interim ministry emerged and policies on clergy separation were put in place by denominational bodies.

One challenge arises when retired clergy just cannot let go. “Clergy want to be loved and needed; that’s part of why they go into ministry,” said Sarah Moore-Nokes, general presbyter of the Winnebago Presbytery in Wisconsin. “Often their identity is wrapped up in their vocation. They have a hard time understanding their role after retirement, and cross boundaries with the minister who follows them. And congregations don’t understand either. They are not able to make the connection between what is normal in their workplace and what they have to do at church. I see this all the time. That’s why these policies are in place.”

A policy on the ethics of leaving a church may guide clergy to a graceful exit, but it doesn’t address their need to continue engaging in ministry while they still have gifts to share. Now that 60 is the new 50, some clergy are experimenting with different transition models. They are looking for creative ways to slow down and make room for new leaders—without coming to a complete and sudden stop.

Wayne Drueck served his small, urban church for ten years. After seminary student Julie Goranson visited one Sunday, the congregation approached her about filling in during Drueck’s sabbatical. She was hired first as an intern, and the two developed a healthy rapport.

Meanwhile, Drueck and his wife began talking about retirement. They wanted more time with their grandchild, but they were not ready to go into retirement cold turkey.

So Drueck approached Goranson about the possibility of job sharing.

“When I proposed this arrangement, I could see Julie’s eyes light up,” he said. Drueck and Goranson created a staffing arrangement in which each served the church half time, alternating weeks in the office. On Sunday afternoons, they met to discuss pastoral care and administrative details and to hand off what they called the “bat phone,” a cell phone carried by whichever pastor was currently on duty.

“I was a better pastor because of working with Julie,” said Drueck. He had found himself approaching burnout in ministry, but with the new arrangement, “I found new motivation because I felt accountable not only to the congregation but to her. She challenged me to leave my comfort zone occasionally.” Meanwhile, Drueck was able to be a mentor to his younger colleague. “I brought a skepticism that could, on certain occasions, be healthy and helpful,” he says.

Goranson eventually completed her ordination process. After an examination by a pastoral search team within the church, she accepted a call to serve the church as its solo pastor. Drueck transitioned into full retirement.

This transition story could be called a “succession model.” It defies the usual practice in many denominations, which want to create a break between pastors for a time of assessment and a search for fresh leadership.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) prohibits following the succession model. “A succession model would shape the transition around that retiring leader’s vision,” explained Moore-Nokes. “It gives no breathing space or gaps where the congregation can experience what ministry might be like without that former head of staff. Unless you take the person out of the system, you don’t allow space to see what new things may be brought to the table.” In some cases, however, succession may be the best available response to a leadership void.

Policies on retirement posit a clean break and don’t address clergy’s need to use their gifts.

Dave King spent 20 years in bivocational ministry, serving a small, rural Presbyterian church half time while working in various other jobs, including farming and chairing the local town board. A few years ago a member of his church, retired auto mechanic Terry McGinley, began training as a commissioned ruling elder. The congregation sensed that McGinley might be the right person to lead the church

after King’s retirement.

Over the course of a year, the pastor and the elder pursued a gradual hand-off of the ministry. McGinley took on more preaching and leadership, with King serving as mentor until his retirement.

After King’s departure, he faced another dilemma common to retired clergy: his small town offered few options for a new church home. He and McGinley approached their presbytery with a plan that allowed King to return to the church as a member once certain conditions were met. Among them was the condition that the congregation must stop asking “What would Pastor Dave do?” when faced with new decisions.

Often a clergy retirement provides an opportunity to explore new staff configurations. Lorri Steward was hired in 2004 as a half-time associate pastor. It was a new position for the church, which was attempting to expand its ministry with families. Steward was so effective in that role that, three years later, her position was expanded to full time. As with Drueck and Goransen, she and her senior colleague, Roger Mealiff, developed a strong rapport, and the congregation flourished under their leadership.

But even as the church’s ministry grew, it struggled with a tight budget. When Mealiff realized that staffing would have to be cut, he did some soul searching and came up with an unconventional proposal: to cut his own hours instead of Steward’s. Starting in 2015, the church employed him as a half-time senior pastor, with Steward as full-time associate. Mealiff comes in to work for two weeks and then takes two weeks off, with Steward assuming full pastoral duties in his absence. Steward admits that the staff downsizing has not been conducive to church growth. But she is also grateful that she and her colleague can continue to work as a team.

As for Mealiff, he thinks the new arrangement will help prepare the congregation for his retirement. It also gives him a glimpse of his own future. Although he struggles with the notion of letting go, the new schedule has given him time to think about his identity as a retired pastor. “It’s helping me figure out who I am,” he said.

In these examples we see mentoring relationships built into pastoral transitions. Such an arrangement can build up younger pastors while also enlivening the final years of ministry for their older colleagues. And the opportunity for a church to have two ministers instead of one, even in a part-time capacity, is an appealing option, as

a team can bring increased vitality and more diverse skills to the table.

David Moyer, a retired leader in the UCC, believes that alternatives to the widely accepted interim transition model should be explored when appropriate. “I feel strongly that most healthy churches, even with long-term pastors, would do better with a succession model,” he says. For example, a pastor planning to retire might give the congregation a year’s notice to begin the search for a new pastor while he or she is still in place, “as long as there is a good relationship and there’s not an unhealthy dependence.”

As for the risk of former pastors staying active in a congregation, Moyer said he “would like to see us move from a rule-based system. Why can’t we treat clergy as responsible adults and give them the guidelines for a relationship that transitions from professional, so that personal relationships can remain?”

But as more clergy retire in the same locations where they have served churches, some judicatories are instead tightening their policies on pastoral separation. In the region where Moore-Nokes serves, the policy discourages retirees from maintaining even informal relationships—including social media connections—with former parishioners if they are perceived as eroding a new pastor’s professional role. Requirements like this are meant to prevent an improper crossing of professional boundaries, but they can be interpreted as severely limiting to clergy who feel they still have gifts to offer and relationships to maintain.

“This is not your grandfather’s retirement,” said Maggie Lewis, executive director of the Center for Career Development in Dedham, Massachusetts. Lewis, who runs retirement planning workshops for clergy, reports that “the old model of ‘go someplace and rest’ is not really healthy.” She and her colleague Doug Wheeler encourage clergy facing retirement to think beyond the parish and about the new shape their lives might take after retirement—a period that may extend to 20 or more years. Possibilities might include working for entrepreneurial nonprofits, doing some church consulting, volunteering, reengaging with family, or pursuing recreation or artistic pursuits. The aim is to shift into new ventures, instead of reverting to former roles that are no longer appropriate.

“Clergy are, by nature, wired for mission and purpose,” said Wheeler.

Judicatory leaders may feel either overjoyed or overwhelmed by an expanding corps of retired clergy who bring a wide range of needs and gifts to the wider church’s

table. Moyer hopes that the future will bring a fruitful convergence of older clergy who need more relaxed schedules and a supplement to their pensions with congregations that can no longer support full-time salaries.

Whatever happens, judicatories will have to stay focused on the leadership needs of churches. Congregations, for their part, might be wise to find roles for retirees who are creative and flexible—and who can support new pastors in a time when the demands of leadership are changing.

“My guess is that no matter how the transitions happen, a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate,” said Moore-Nokes.

A version of this article appears in the February 1 print edition under the title “Blurring the lines.”