

Step aside: The 'former pastor' problem

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [July 26, 2005](#) issue

When I speak in churches across the country, I often hear “former pastor” stories, or stories about struggles that involve a former pastor. What is this “former pastor problem”? Simply put, it refers to pastors who hang around after they are no longer employed by a congregation—and meddle.

For the former pastor, it comes down to being where you aren’t supposed to be, expressing opinions about things that no longer have your name on them and assuming an authority that you don’t or shouldn’t have. Perhaps the former pastor decides (or is pressed by misguided parishioners) to intrude at pastoral moments, times of personal crisis, death or birth. Or perhaps the former pastor tries to influence the search process for his or her successor. Often the misbehavior involves suggestive but negative messages dropped in the hearing of a congregant regarding the current direction of the church or its present leadership. And almost always it happens with “good intentions.”

Let’s be fair. Leaving a congregation is tough on both parties. A pastor gives the better part of his or her life, time and emotional energy to a congregation and its people. The pastor knows their stories, shares their dreams. And they grow accustomed to understanding life through their pastor’s words and presence. Sometimes the pastor and congregation have become codependent. In these instances they become hooked together, dependent on one another for identity and function. In these situations, terminating the relationship is even more difficult and messy.

The obvious remedy and strategy—one that must occur well before a pastor leaves a congregation—is for the congregation to help the pastor cultivate relationships and activities outside of the church. The pastor must “get a life” beyond the congregation. Both the congregation and the pastor need to permit and encourage this separation, but often neither does. Congregations want all of the time, energy

and attention they can get from a pastor. And pastors, to be honest, may find people's apparent need for their time to be satisfying.

When a pastor retires, the absence of a life and network of relationships apart from the congregation comes into vivid and painful relief. This is heightened by the increase in life span, which means that for many there is another full chapter of life to be lived after retirement. The gift of longer lives can, however, be turned into opportunity. A person who retires from pastoral ministry often has the health and vitality, not to mention the practical wisdom and experience, to make a contribution elsewhere. I counsel pastors preparing for retirement to have a plan. It can and will be revised, but a first draft is essential.

It is also essential that former pastors get out of the way. Different denominations have different practices and positions in regard to the role of former pastors. Some require separation, some give little guidance and some give no guidance at all. Getting out of the way is essential because of the intimate nature of the pastor-congregation relationship, a relationship that in some ways is like no other. It's not like the doctor-patient relationship, with its time-limited appointments. Nor is it like the professor-student relationship, with students moving on after graduation. Some have described the relationship of pastor and congregation as that of lovers (and yes, there are lovers' quarrels). If there is truth in this analogy, it makes the need for the lover's departure even more urgent.

"Emotional availability" is the key prerequisite for forming a new, enduring and life-giving relationship. In order to be emotionally available for a new relationship, you have to grieve and let go of the relationship that's ended. It doesn't mean that you don't remember that relationship and appreciate it. But you no longer live in it emotionally. You work to create space in your heart, soul and psyche in order to "fall in love" again, which is different from having a short-term infatuation that does not require such space. Getting out of the way allows this to happen. If the former pastor is still around, participating in the congregational life, a congregation may not be emotionally available for someone new.

The same advice goes for incoming pastors. Pastor-parish relationships have crashed on the rocks, or at least had rocky beginnings, because a pastor was still in love with a former congregation. A pastor must grieve over and surrender that relationship before he or she can love a new congregation. When working with people who have lost a job, I stress the importance of doing one's grief work with

respect to that former position. If one doesn't, it will be in the way at a job interview or when a new position comes along.

What if the former pastor (and his or her family) stays active in the congregation? Some, of course, pull that off with grace and dignity. Far too many do not. Let me suggest several essential steps in making such a relationship work.

First, when a pastorate ends, ritualize the ending with a liturgy that acknowledges the conclusion of the covenant between pastor and congregation. "You are no longer our pastor." "You are no longer the congregation I serve as pastor." Name it. Solemnize it. Ritualize it. Include a pastor's family members: they have been included in and affected by the ministry and relationship. And offer it all to God with prayers of gratitude and prayers for forgiveness.

Second, if the former pastor is going to continue to be active in the congregation, there should be a formal conversation with a small group of church leaders (not just with the new pastor) about what each party needs and expects of the other. The former pastor should not be available for pastoral functions or counseling. The congregation must support this by saying to those who inquire, "She is not able to do that for you." The former pastor and her family ought to be able to enjoy worship and fellowship as long as they understand and live within their new role. The former pastor must avoid committee, board or leadership assignments, unless specifically asked by his or her successor.

President Bush's use of former presidents Clinton and Bush is instructive. Their role as tsunami relief advocates utilizes their visibility without putting them near the center of policy debates. The former pastor should avoid discussions of church policies and politics with people inside and outside the church. He or she must just say no and talk about other things. People will catch on and will honor the former pastor for his or her integrity.

Key lay leaders and the new pastor should hold a once-a-year formal briefing with the former pastor, if that person is interested and willing, and invite the former pastor's counsel and opinion. It may also be a good idea to have celebrations of the congregation's past and its story. This is the time to ask a former pastor to play a role or preach the sermon, or speak about his or her current work or interests. In other words, remember and honor former pastors, but in formalized ways in which the boundaries are clear.

Some congregations have sought to institutionalize such a relationship with the “emeritus minister” designation, but unless the meaning of the title is articulated (and it seldom is), people perceive a variety of different meanings, some of them off-base and unhelpful.

How we handle leadership transition in the church is a part of a church’s ministry. Done poorly or indifferently, it haunts us, ruins lives and fractures churches. Done well it is a sign to the world of God’s continuing faithfulness in the midst of change. n