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Faithful Transitions Blog: Professional Boundaries – Former Pastors

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Having served for many years as a presenter for my synod's annual Professional Boundaries seminars for pastors and lay leaders, one of the areas we covered concerned the interference of former pastors in congregations in which they had previously served. Participants were made aware of the provision in the synod's constitution, which states:

S14.14 Ordained ministers shall respect the integrity of the ministry of the congregations which they do not serve and shall not exercise ministerial functions therein unless invited to do so by the pastor, or if there is no duly called pastor, then by the interim pastor in consultation with the Congregation Council.

We have heard from pastors in various parts of the country that, in cases where congregations are considering their continued affiliation with the ELCA, synod bishops are not only *allowing* former pastors to interfere in the affairs of congregations they have previously served, but that bishops are actually *inviting* former pastors to violate this boundary of respect, by arranging for speaking engagements and administrative consultation with former pastors, apart from (and often against the wishes of) the current pastor.

The following is the official policy statement of my own synod; similar statements may be found in the policies of other synods. It gives some helpful advice for congregations and pastors that are being directed by synod officials to violate proper ministerial boundaries:

Pastoral Ethics:

Pastors Relating To Previously Served Parishes*

When a pastor accepts a call to a congregation, a sacred covenant is established between the pastor and the people of God in that place. In order for ministry to be strong and effective, the covenant needs to be strengthened and nurtured until God calls that pastor to another sector of ministry. When a pastor resigns a call, the covenant ends.

How does a pastor relate appropriately to members of a congregation where one has previously served? We offer the following guidelines so that good choices can be made which do not negatively impact the ministry of the people of God.

1. It is your responsibility as a former pastor to decline invitations to conduct pastoral acts (baptism, weddings, funerals, hospital visits, etc.) in any former parish. It is important that you do not pass the burden of such decisions back to the pastor who currently holds that call nor to elected congregational leaders. As professional people, we commit ourselves to act responsibly in these matters. For the sake of the church and the ongoing ministry of the congregation, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." When we do that, our relating to members of previous parishes can be used by God to build up the body of Christ.

2. It is your responsibility as a former pastor to be supportive of your successor (even when that is difficult to do). It is your responsibility to sever pastoral ties with your former congregation.

3. While the above statements are addressed to pastors, spouses of pastors must consider the same factors, and also respect the recommendations made above. Spouses share a pastoral identity and, as a result, can become hindrances as easily as a pastor can.

** Adopted by the Southwestern Minnesota Synod Council, January 18, 1997.*

