

**Parish Ministry Transition and Retirement  
Expectations for the Sake of the Church  
Office of the Bishop, New Jersey Synod, ELCA**

Change is one of the core values of the New Jersey Synod. As we embrace change as both a reality in our lives and a place of growth and opportunity, we know change can also bring about grief and anxiety. This is especially true of the change in the life of a congregation brought about by a rostered minister's resignation or retirement. This document seeks to set out the expectations that the Office of the Bishop has for both rostered ministers and congregations at those times of change.

***Pastoral transition through the lens of mission.***

The ministry transition process in a congregation is about mission – God's mission. It is about understanding that the ministry entrusted to the ordained is a privilege, a stewardship, and not our possession. When that stewardship is ended, it is over for us and entrusted to another.

The plan for transition is outlined in *The Pastoral Call Process Booklet*. It is a guided process from the Office of the Bishop and provides opportunity for new ministry direction and new ministry style. That new vision is rooted in (1) study and reflection upon God's intention for the Church, (2) assessment of mission needs, and opportunities in the congregation and community, and (3) discussion and exploration of new possibilities for ministry leadership.

This mission discussion is about how the people of God in a particular place will plan to follow Jesus into the future. The discussion belongs to those who will be making the journey together. The discussion continues through the transition phase, and throughout the new ministry of a pastor or deacon. The previous minister plays an important role in creating safe and unencumbered space for this mission discussion and transition to take place.

What follows is particularly applicable to the retirement of a pastor serving a congregation but has implications for deacons serving a congregation as well.

***When the pastor is moving into retirement***

- A. Moving your membership to a new congregation. Parish ministry is built on relationships. There is an absolute need for space so relationships, particularly new ones, can develop. This encourages the congregation to be truly intentional about the new pastor-parish relationship.
- B. Saying "no" to pastoral acts. This is hard for both the pastor and the congregation. Saying something like "it's not appropriate for me to ..." reminds the parishioner that

you are no longer the pastor and does not put the new pastor into an awkward situation. Having a support group of other newly retired pastors can help you keep this boundary.

- C. Be clear with the Bishop about retirement plans/dates as soon as you have determined them. Identify your last Sunday as early as possible so that the presence of someone representing the Bishop's office can be arranged.
- D. Read the synod call process document but do not attempt to explain the process. Someone from the Office of the Bishop will meet with the council to review the process and be available to answer questions from the congregation.
- E. Do not get involved in selecting the call committee.
- F. Write a letter to the congregation clarifying the ground rules for your leaving. Ask them to refrain from asking you to return for baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc.
- G. Provide time for an exit interview with the Bishop or an Assistant to the Bishop. This is time to reflect on your ministry, and an opportunity to share your perspective on the challenges and opportunities ahead for the congregation.

### ***Other matters at retirement***

- A. The requirement to move congregational membership can be especially challenging for the spouse and immediate family of the pastor. Long-time friendships and leadership in particular areas of parish life seem disrupted and the spouse can feel unfairly penalized for needing to move. But experience has shown that it can be even more difficult for the spouse and immediate family to remain in a congregation. It is not easy to remain silent when changes are made by a new pastor. It is hard to hear affirmations of a new pastor without thinking this is a reflection on some inability of the former pastor. It can be awkward to find oneself receiving criticism of the new pastor from members who believe you would naturally share their view or anticipate that you would hear those criticisms as affirmation of your spouse. While difficult, for the sake of the health and well-being of the community, we ask the spouse and immediate family to move their membership and become involved in another congregation.
- B. Timing of the announcement of retirement plans is a judgement call on the part of the pastor. Some pastors want to do this well in advance of their last Sunday for planning purposes. Others don't want the good-bye to be drawn out and give 4-6 weeks' notice. Consultation with the Bishop is important so the announcement can be made in the best interest of the congregation.

- C. Life after retirement can be filled with supply preaching and interim ministry or not! While we utilize the gifts of our retired pastors in many ways, the truth is you have already served well and are not under obligation to do more than you want to do. Enjoy life as a retired pastor of this church.
- D. Pastor Emeritus is a title some congregations bestow upon their pastor following retirement. This is an honorific for a local setting, which confers no rights or privileges in ministry, and carries no roster status.
- E. Requesting retired roster status is your responsibility. According to the constitution, retired roster status can be granted by action of the Synod Council. The pastor should write a letter to the Bishop requesting retired roster status. Being placed in this category is a privilege that is not automatically granted and is reviewed periodically.
- F. Retirement benefits, if through Portico, require the pastor to complete a packet of materials which includes signature of the Bishop. The application for retirement benefits should be made at least three months prior to the effective date of retirement. There are retirement specialists at Portico who can help you navigate the necessary paperwork.

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April 2024