

Dear Bishop,

Sometime within the next year I will be retiring. Already, members of my congregation have asked me if I plan to stay as a member following my retirement. Some who know more about such matters ask me if I will ask the new pastor if I can return as a member after an appropriate time away. Several have made it quite clear that they want me to do their funeral and in one case their wedding. Some simply express that they would love to see my wife and I remain as members. This is what I tell them.

First, I tell them that I love them very much and always will. However, on the day of my retirement I will no longer be their pastor. I share with them that it is very important for their new pastor to immediately begin bonding with them. One of the best ways to do that is through the wonderful acts of pastoral care: weddings, funerals, hospital visits, baptisms, etc. If I stay around, I will certainly be asked many times to be a part of these events, thus depriving the called pastor of his or her opportunity to bond with them. Some will understand this, others will not.

Second, I don't wish to presume anything regarding their new pastor. He or she may be such a non-anxious person that the presence of a retired and former pastor would never be considered a threat. On the other hand, some pastors may have had a painful experience or two with former pastors and would prefer not to be placed in that position again. Some may prefer to not have the former pastor "looking over their shoulder". Since I should not presume their will on this matter, nor would I ever want to make them feel obligated to welcome me back as a member, when I say good-bye, I will mean it.

Third, I simply must accept the fact that a retired pastor has a unique position in a congregation. I will never be thought of as "just a layperson" because the members won't let me. They will always see me as a pastor or, in the case of this congregation, as "their" pastor. Many lay members are not familiar with the theological mandates concerning a pastor's call to a congregation and thus will be confused, even angry, when their beloved retired pastor acts "muted" in deference to the called pastor's viewpoints and actions.

Bishop, I try not to use the word legacy, but, whether I like it or not, every pastor does leave a legacy, for good or for bad. One of my fears is that I will work for years building a congregation, leaving (I hope) a wonderful legacy, and all of it may be lost or damaged if my former members do not allow me to keep a healthy distance from the congregation from which I retired.

Thus, I write to share with you that I will not be staying with my current parish after retirement nor will I ask the new pastor to invite me back. I will alleviate the double bind I obviously would place him or her in to make the decision. I realize that forcing him or her to decide will, regardless of the decision, be welcomed by some while angering others.

During the final months of my pastorate before retirement, I will make it bountifully clear that I will not conduct pastoral acts for anyone after my retirement. Don't ask me! Don't ask the new pastor to ask me! I will affirm my love for them and welcome their visits, but if they do visit, I will insist that they do not bring up issues concerning the church.

So Bishop, am I being realistic? Or am I being unkind? I truly wish for my wife and me to join a new congregation and for both of us to make healthy contributions to their ministry. If invited by the

pastor, we will serve the congregation under his/her direction. I am actually looking forward to a fresh beginning with a new role for both of us.

Peace,

*A Retiring Pastor*