

Ministering Together

Our reading from Hebrew Scripture reminds us that leading a congregation can be challenging. Moses had to put up with a lot of whining and complaining from the People of Israel, after he led them out of captivity in Egypt. There was a fair amount of bad behavior among them, too. But at the time of today's passage, their wandering in the wilderness— with all its trials and tribulations— is almost over, and they are about to enter the Promised Land. Moses, though, is feeling insecure in his leadership, and he wants some reassurance that God is really with him. I've had moments like that!

Ministry is often described as a mutual relationship between pastor and congregation, but it's easy for both the pastor and the congregation to forget to see themselves as partners. We clergy often take on more than we should, not realizing that this can disempower a congregation. And congregation members, all busy people themselves, are often willing to let a pastoral leader do most of the work. Now that your search for new leadership is complete, and you are ready— you *really are* ready— to enter into a new ministerial partnership with Ed Sunday-Winters, I'd like to share a few thoughts, from the pastor's side, on how to keep your partnership happy and healthy.

We pastors learn a lot, through study and experience, about how to take good care of a congregation. The following are some tips for the congregation on how to take appropriate care of your pastor. Many of these are things you already know and do. I have enjoyed my partnership with you, because you *have* been good partners in ministry. So please consider this as more of a refresher course, although you may hear some new information, too.

To begin with, remember that Ed's first relationship is with *God*, and his first responsibility is *to* God. Moses never forgot where his primary commitment lay, even though there were times when it made him unpopular. I remember the time, in my first pastorate, when a church member came into my office to express his unhappiness with something I'd said in a sermon. After he finished telling me off, he pointed his finger at me and said, "Don't forget, you work for *us*."

I was somewhat shaken by this encounter, and so I shared the story with a trusted friend. "He's wrong, you know," she responded. "You don't work for them. You work for God." This doesn't mean that we are above reproach. You may have heard the quip that the task of preaching is to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." In our prophetic role, there are times when we pastors do feel that, to be true to God, we have to say something uncomfortable to a congregation. Ideally, if there are differences, you and Ed will turn to prayer, discerning *together* how God is at work, in and through this congregation.

Try to remember that Ed is *not* God Jr. Please don't try to make him *into* God Jr. Unfortunately, we clergy are very susceptible to the temptation to try to *be* God Jr.— wishing we could meet all

your needs and heal all your ills. Someone once described Protestant pastors as “quivering masses of availability,” which is why so many of us burn out. Let Ed know that you *don't* expect him to overwork. When he has had an extra busy week, let him know that you *do* expect him to take comp time. And make sure he takes *all* of his vacation time. He will need it.

Ed will be arriving with his wife. Patti needs him to have time for her, too. Please don't hesitate to invite them, as a couple, to your homes and to plan joyful congregational gatherings. Having fun together is a great way to get to know Ed and Patti. At the same time, allow them privacy. Honor their right to regard the parsonage as their personal space— their home— and not as an extension of the church.

Don't expect Ed and Patti to be a twofer. Allow Patti to freely decide on her own level of involvement in the church. Once upon a time, a clergyman (yes, it was almost always a man) generally came with a wife (at that time, always a woman!) who was expected to play the organ, direct the choir, teach Sunday School, lead the woman's fellowship and take meals to the sick and homebound. Being a clergy spouse was a full-time unpaid job. Nowadays, we understand that clergy spouses have lives of their own.

Encourage Ed to spend time, *outside* of his pastoral responsibilities, doing the things that feed him— activities he finds fulfilling. Recognize that whenever he is with you, *any of you*, or out and about in this community, he can never really take off his “pastor” hat. He needs to find people with whom he *can* take that hat off and be himself. A pastor who maintains healthy boundaries does *not* expect congregation members to take care of his or her emotional needs. Expect him to build and maintain strong friendships *outside* of the congregation.

In his worship and pastoral leadership, anticipate that he will change things and do some things differently. Try not to be too attached to the way Anthony did things, or to the way I did things. I know that change can be difficult, but there's nothing more stifling to a pastor's creativity than the words, “We (or our former pastor) always did it *this way*.” It's fine to talk about cherished church customs, and I'm sure he will want to know what those are, but I hope you will also be open to the new ideas he brings.

Remember that Ed is human, and he will make mistakes. If something he does troubles you, please discuss it with him *directly* before you discuss it with anyone else. Don't say anything *about* him that you are not willing to say *to* him. If there is a problem, Ed needs to know what it is so that he can work *with* you to address it.

You have called a pastor with an open and outgoing personality, a good sense of humor, a great love of God, and a passion for justice. I think that you can look forward to a loving and productive partnership. Just remember that when it comes to this wonderfully messy business of being the church, you're all in it together.

Next Sunday, we will do a Litany of Farewell to mark the ending of my role as your Interim Pastor. During the coming year, I will keep my distance in order to give Ed time to establish his ministry with you. I know that this seems hard to many of you, but respecting these boundaries will help you to connect with Ed as your Pastor. I've been asked to explain why these boundaries are in place, and so I'm going to share with you a couple of the scenarios used for discussion in *Healthy Boundaries, Healthy Relationships, Healthy Churches*, a Boundary Awareness Training for Lay Leaders, developed by the Vermont Conference, UCC. These scenarios were developed by the Rev. Susan Craig, Associate Conference Minister in the Maine Conference, UCC. The first addresses the situation of a pastor who has retired and remains in the community:

Pastor is grocery shopping and runs into members of the Pastor's former congregation in the supermarket. Pastor greets the friends and begins a conversation. Soon the conversation moves from what is for dinner to "have you heard what is happening in the church?" The pastor takes an interest and listens intently. Sighs of frustration are heard as the conversation continues. [A] long standing tradition . . . is being changed . . . the Pastor lets [their dismay] be known. Other church members arrive, and soon, the salad bar is buzzing with church gossip.

There can be a tremendous temptation, on both sides, if a former pastor is in the community, to engage in conversation about how the church is doing now, especially if there is unhappiness with something that the new pastor is trying. If the former pastor has even the slightest negative response, this can cause division in the congregation.

The second scenario responds to a common question, one I've been asked by Greensboro church members, about a former pastor conducting a wedding or funeral:

The former pastor of a congregation has resigned and moved out of town. The former pastor is contacted by a family in the congregation to please come and do the memorial service for their grandmother. Out of loyalty to the family, the former pastor accepts their invitation but says that he can only come and do the service if the present pastor says that he can. The former pastor sees no problem in this, and is simply trying not to disappoint a family with whom the pastor has had a long relationship while serving the congregation. Certainly the former pastor knows this family better than the new pastor.

When the family asks the present pastor IF he will give permission for the former pastor to return and do the service, the present pastor feels caught between a rock and a hard place. There seems to be no way to graciously say no without creating hard feelings— at least with this family in his new congregation— and perhaps others. The arrival of the former pastor is startling to other members of the congregation who see the former pastor leading the service without knowing what had happened. It is difficult for the new pastor who was not invited to participate, but no one wants to upset the family. However, there is murmuring— as to who is so special that the pastor would come back for them . . . how about for our family? — as to what's wrong with our new pastor that they would even think of inviting the former pastor to return.

This church has a policy— one that predates my time here— that the current settled Pastor will perform baptisms, weddings, and funerals. There are many good reasons for such a policy. I hope you can see, from the story I just shared, some of the problems for your new pastor, and hurt feelings among the congregation, that can arise if this policy is not respected. A wedding or funeral can also be an excellent way for your new pastor to get to know a family and for the community to get to know him.

I've sometimes thought that a congregation whose minister has resigned or retired is a bit like someone who has just gone through a divorce. And the incoming pastor is like a new spouse, trying to find their place in an unfamiliar community. Think how hard it will be for this new couple if the ex is present at every social event they attend, and how *particularly* hard it will be for the new spouse if their partner still seems to be emotionally tied to the ex. Whatever your pastoral needs may be, it will now be time to turn to your new pastor, rather than a former pastor. This is how you will build the partnership between you.

All UCC clergy agree to abide by *The Code for Authorized Ministers in the United Church of Christ*. This code outlines how we maintain our own personal and family health and the healthiness of our relationships with our congregations. The following provisions define the commitments we make to respect our successors, after a pastorate ends, and to promote the well-being of the new partnership between pastor and congregation:

I will not perform services within a parish or for a member of a parish without the consent of the pastor of that parish.

I will not, upon my termination and departure from a ministry position, interfere with nor intrude upon the ministry of my successor.

Just as there is an ethical code for ministers, in the United Church of Christ, there is also an ethical code for congregations, titled, *The Code for the Local Church in Relation to Its Pastor*. I've placed a copy in your bulletins. I recommend that you read it, ponder it, discuss it among yourselves, and, hopefully, commit to follow it, as you prepare to begin a brand new partnership in ministry.

I am grateful for the partnership we have shared over the past two years. I will continue to pray for you, as I hope you will for me. I have been changed by my time here, perhaps you have been too, and that's something we get to keep. It doesn't go away. And the love that we have shared? That doesn't go away either. I give thanks, to God and to you, for the time we have had together, and I pray that God will richly bless your new ministerial partnership with Ed.

Amen.