

A Message from Bishop Hougen

Dear Friends in Christ,

I know what it feels like. A young woman and her fiancée drove over a hundred miles so I could meet him and they could ask me to officiate at their wedding. This young woman was part of a family to whom I had ministered very intensely in my previous parish. The family lived next door to us; they were very active in the congregation; her father had died after a long bout with cancer at a relatively young age; she was a good friend of my daughter's. I had been her pastor. It hurt me to tell her I would not officiate at her wedding. She was disappointed and hurt by my response. But, I was no longer her pastor; the congregation had new pastors. She had not had an opportunity to establish relationships with her new pastors.

I treasure the privilege of pastoral relationships with people in the congregations which I have served. Sometimes those relationships are very meaningful friendships as well. However, pastors must realize that they must sever pastoral relationships with people when they leave a congregation. We must also help congregations understand that we cannot serve them once we have left.

Pastors who accept invitation to do pastoral acts in congregations they have formerly served negatively impact the ministry of the new pastor. Pastors new to a congregation need every opportunity they can have to establish themselves in the same pastoral relationships which have been enjoyed by pastors who have left. The office of pastoral ministry is to be respected and accepted apart from personal feelings and relationships.

Sometimes it's painful for pastors to observe changes made by their successors. When former parishioners engage us in conversations complaining about their present pastor, they may even think they are being supportive to us. It's hard for us to say, "No," to friends who are telling us how important we are. In my role as bishop, I have observed some of the pain caused by pastors for their successors. Well-intentioned actions or expressions of opinion sometimes are interpreted as second-guessing or interference. We sometimes act as if nobody else could possibly serve as pastor as well as we did. Sometimes pastors are acting out of their own needs for approval or affection and don't recognize the damage they are doing to a new pastor's ministry. Involvement in congregations previously served is unethical and destructive.

When pastors leave congregations, they need to really leave. It is important to refuse invitations to serve former parishioners pastorally. It is important to avoid disapproval of or disagreement with our successors. It is a matter of pastoral ethics. Lay people need to understand that it is inappropriate to request the pastoral presence of pastors who have left. Lay people need to let their new pastor be their pastor. More than one person can serve faithfully and well as a congregation's pastor.

It's not enough for former pastors to say that it's up to the new pastor to decide whether or not they should participate in pastoral acts. That puts the new pastor in the terrible position of either diminishing their own pastoral role or rejecting their well-loved predecessor and damaging their relationship with their parishioners. In almost all cases, it is best for pastors not to belong to congregations they have previously served. It is too easy for us to be drawn into disagreements between members and the present pastor. Even innocent remarks get interpreted as criticism or second-guessing.

I know that not all will agree with my views on this, but I do ask that all of us prayerfully consider these matters as issues of pastoral ethics and that we always try to serve not ourselves, but the welfare of the Church.

Sincerely,
Philip L. Hougen, Bishop