

Frequently Asked Questions
Regarding Pastors Who Retire or Depart for a New Call
Greater Milwaukee Synod

1. Why does the ELCA and the Greater Milwaukee Synod encourage pastors who retire to find a new congregational home?

Pastors are often involved in almost every aspect of congregational life: administrative, educational, preaching and worship leadership, pastoral care, and relationships with many, if not all, members. For them to remove themselves from some of these areas while seeking to maintain their presence and their relationships in a congregation has proven to be problematic, even for the healthiest of pastors and congregations. In order for the next pastor to be granted the opportunity to develop the relationships needed for them to serve successfully, we believe that it is best for retiring pastors to find a new congregational home.

2. Shouldn't the decision regarding a former pastor's involvement be left to the congregation?

We have found that many congregations desire to maintain a relationship with their former pastor out of love and appreciation for their ministry. This is ultimately a question of professional boundaries, and we believe that it is incumbent upon the pastor to set those boundaries and publicly state their intention to leave the congregation. Even though pastors are called to forge deep and loving relationships with their parishioners, we believe that a pastor's love for the congregation and its continued ministry is more important than their affection for any specific individual or family in the congregation.

Our primary concern is for the health and well-being of the congregation and its ability to move forward into its next chapter of ministry with new pastoral leadership. We have found that when congregations maintain significant relationships with their previous pastors, it hinders their ability to form the relationships they need to form with their current leaders.

3. Isn't it enough for the former pastor to simply agree not to perform any pastoral acts (baptisms, weddings, funerals)?

It is certainly inappropriate for any pastor to provide pastoral services of any kind for members of a congregation they are not currently serving, unless requested to do so by the current pastor. It is most helpful if congregation members and their families are aware of this and do not make requests of former pastors, as that can put the pastors in an awkward position of having to say "no" to people whom they care for. Former pastors may choose to attend a wedding or a funeral of a former parishioner as a friend of the family, but even that should only be done after consultation with the current pastor.

Pastors who are effective in their ministry forge a strong relational bond with their parishioners, and if those parishioners continue to turn to their former pastors for care, attention, and support, they will not turn to their current pastors, those who are called to serve them now.

4. What about young couples getting married or families planning a funeral who do not have a relationship with the current pastor? Can a former pastor perform their wedding or funeral if it's not held in the church?

While it may make sense for parishioners to request a pastor whom at least some of them know and have a relationship with to perform their wedding or a funeral ceremony, we would encourage former pastors to direct them back to the current pastor, giving them a chance to forge a relationship that may lead to future congregational engagement. Marriages and funerals are rites of the church, not private affairs, and so are best performed by the person called to perform these rites on behalf of the congregation.

5. What about friendships and connecting via social media?

We recognize that pastors occupy a unique relational space, blending elements of our public, private, and personal lives. We also know that the nature of relating has changed in this digital age, and physical proximity is no longer a prerequisite for maintaining a relationship. We encourage all pastors who depart from a congregation to be thoughtful about their interactions with their former parishioners, ensuring that the content of those interactions does not move into what might be considered pastoral care or comments about congregational life. Some pastors choose to “unfollow” or even “unfriend” their former parishioners on Facebook and other social media platforms, while others may read the posts of former parishioners but refrain from active engagement.

6. What about granting a retiring pastor the status of “Pastor Emeritus/Emerita”?

The title of “pastor emeritus/emera” is an honorary title, sometimes granted to a retired pastor in gratitude for their many years of service in a particular setting. It does not convey any specific role or set of responsibilities, and any pastor granted this title should not be listed on the church’s website or masthead, as that could be confusing. We strongly recommend that congregations wait at least one full year after the next pastor is called before considering granting such status, and that they be in consultation with the bishop’s office before beginning such consideration.

7. Can the retiring pastor simply leave the congregation for a period of time and then return?

We have found that it is most helpful if departing pastors do so without a stated intent to return in a specified period of time, as that can create an expectation that may not be fulfilled. Our experience is that, once a pastor leaves a congregation, it takes some time for both the pastor and the congregation to adjust to this new reality. If, after a period of at least one year after the new pastor is called, the retired pastor wishes to inquire about returning to active membership, we would recommend that a private conversation take place with the current pastor and synod bishop to determine the best path forward.

8. What would happen if a pastor chooses not to follow this guidance?

A pastor's status on the retired roster of the ELCA is a privilege granted by the synod council, not a right that is to be assumed. Pastors who behave in a manner that is inconsistent with the expectations of a rostered minister and public leader may be denied entry onto the retired roster, or they may be removed by action of the synod council. The ELCA Roster Manual indicates that the status of every retired rostered minister is to be reviewed at least every three years. A pastor who is removed from the roster would then be considered a lay person and unable to conduct activities normally associated with ordained ministry (presiding at the sacraments, performing weddings, etc.).

9. What about the retiring pastor's family? Can they remain as members of the congregation?

Family members are not bound by the same expectations as members of the clergy roster, so we would encourage pastoral sensitivity on behalf of all those involved to engage in conversations regarding the best way to balance the needs of the congregation to move into their next chapter of ministry with the pastoral needs of the family. We would encourage open and honest conversation among all parties as they seek the best resolution to this question.

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