



# From the Heart

## An open letter of pastoral advice

By PETER ROGNESS

**A**s pastor and bishop I've written stacks of articles like this for newsletters. Several years ago, I wrote one that out-distanced all others as a requested reprint. I've since suggested the article can help congregations in transition as information and education for parishioners and as a reminder to pastors about the supportive relationships we establish with each other.

### Why not ask our former pastor?

*An open letter of pastoral advice from Bishop Peter Rogness*

With our synod as geographically compact as it is, pastors who have moved from one congregation to another ministry are often asked to perform pastoral acts by their former parishioners. There is no painless way out of this situation that is both understandable and awkward.

A good pastoral relationship is not coldly functional; it is personal as well. So it is not at all uncommon for people facing a wedding, funeral, baptism, or illness to request the presence of a pastor who has been personally important in their lives. Good pastors can expect that times will come when former parishioners would like the pastoral relationship to continue for an important occasion.

That's where we run into trouble. We need to be clear on what has come to be understood as a professional ethic for pastors: when a pastor leaves a parish, she/he is no longer those people's pastor. He/she may continue to be a friend, but the pastoral relationship is ended. The implications for pastors are clear: it is often (not always) appropriate to do what other friends do—attend a wedding or funeral—but the act of presiding or participating as a pastor in those moments belongs to the current pastor.

I served a wonderful parish for ten years and for the next 15 years continued to live in the same house, just over a mile from the church. I knew this awkward situation well—I was often asked. I found the best response to be something like, "I'm not your pastor, \_\_\_\_\_ is. But I'm glad you'd like me there, and I'd love to come if invited, as your other friends do."

I didn't say, "You'll have to talk to your pastor about that." That would have put the current pastor in the no-win situation of either saying yes and relinquishing the pastoral role to me, or saying no and being regarded by parishioners as cold, jealous, and insensitive to their wishes.

Nor could I say that the church has rules against that, leaving the people to be angry at this arbitrary and autocratic church (and at me for caving in and going along with it). It was best to simply draw the line—I would not do those things.

So what is the best way to handle this?

For laity: don't even ask—it immediately puts both the current and former pastor in very awkward positions. Even if the current pastor is someone that you hardly know, you affirm your former pastor best by inviting her/him to come as a guest, while showing high regard for the pastoral office he/she held by seeking out that new pastor to be your pastor.

For pastors: don't ever give in to the temptation to think "just in this case." Everybody is going to think their situation is the exceptional one. You reduce future difficulty for yourself, your colleagues, and all your former parishioners by being very clear that you simply don't do pastoral acts for former parishioners.

There are also other situations that arise, such as contacts with former pastors over personal life struggles, complaints about the life of the parish, etc., but the same principle applies: we honor our former pastors most highly by recognizing the importance of the work they do and the office they hold by looking to current pastors for those ministry acts.

Most pastors know of this issue, and most are sensitive and appropriate. Many laity have never thought about it and may innocently make this kind of request, not thinking about the complexities. It doesn't hurt to remind congregational members from time to time that this is how we create and nurture healthy on-going pastoral relationships. I don't mean this to sound arbitrary and legalistic. I mean it to be pastoral. This is how we best care for the whole body and each other as members of it.