

Retirement Ritual

by Richard P. Olson

I have been asked to tell about the process and rituals by which I retired from being senior pastor of Prairie Baptist Church in Prairie Village Kansas in 1998, after a 12 ½ year pastorate there.

Two of us on our staff were retiring a month apart (I would be the second to leave), so we announced this together, about two months before his final day and three months before mine. Though I knew my plan to retire for several months, I chose this time frame rather than the year or several months advance announcement some elect before retiring after a long pastorate. I didn't want all of us to grow weary of saying good bye, and I knew a good interim pastorate would be needed. (It did amaze me how suddenly my suggestions lost authority, the moment I announced the retirement!)

In the weeks leading up to my retirement, I explored the meaning and significance of this in church newsletters and sermons. After a long and significant pastoral relationship, it is both difficult and necessary to finish unfinished business with each other, to celebrate our achievements, to mourn our losses and failures, to admit that there is an ending and change, and to say good bye. I tried to say this several ways – in writing, in worship and sermons, with boards and groups, and with individuals. As I was a counseling pastor, this also meant bringing several counseling relationships to closure as well.

I went through a similar process with my staff. At one of our staff meetings we spent time with the American Baptist Ministers Code of Ethics. I asked each staff person to read it through silently, and then tell us how they had been helped a minister's observing some part of that code and/or when they had been hurt when a minister had not lived up to some part of it. Much of the discussion that emerged was about needing to keep the covenant to sever pastoral ties with a previous congregation.

What people remember most about my retirement Sunday is a little ritual we did at the end of the worship service. (I claim no originality on this; indeed, I was adapting a ritual that Ron Brushwyler described at a pre retirement AutumnQuest seminar). On the last verse of the closing hymn, as I pre-arranged, four persons came to the front of the sanctuary and stood with me. They were the moderator, the chair of trustees, the chair of deacons, and my wife Mary Ann.

I gave the chair of trustees my keys to the church and told him that I celebrated our successful building campaign, that we had maintained and improved the building, that we had used it well for ministry and service to the community. I entrusted its care and such decisions to him and the other trustees. I gave the moderator my appointment book and expressed appreciation for working together in leading the church through important times of decision making. (This is where my memory is a bit fuzzy – I know I presented him something, I think it was my appointment book). I took off my robe and gave it to the chair of the diaconate, expressing appreciation and joy for the privilege of planning and leading worship with this congregation, with the wise counsel of the diaconate. Then Mary Ann held out my suit jacket to me, which I put on. I pronounced the benediction, and she and I walked out, followed by these church officers. There followed the luncheon and party the church had planned.

I am told that this ritual – perhaps enhanced by the preparation of the preceding weeks – powerfully communicated the finality of a change in the life of the Olson's and of Prairie Baptist Church. I was looking at the leaders with whom I was speaking, but I am told there were many tears by folks in the congregation as I did these simple acts. Some asked me how I could keep from crying while I did this. I am not afraid of tears, but on that day, I did this with a full heart, grateful that we were finishing in a good way, hopeful that the church and my successor could move on to a rich next chapter.

As I say, I was adapting a ritual I heard broadly described elsewhere. Anyone wanting to create such ritual would undoubtedly select the symbols and persons that would fit one's own unique ministry situation.

There is one more part of the story that needs to be told – keeping the promise made that day. We did not move out of the home in which we lived while serving the church. While I moved into a semi-retirement visiting professorship at Central Baptist Seminary and Mary Ann continued her employment at a Catholic boys high school, these did not provide us the spiritual support community of the church family in which we had invested twelve years.

While it was restful not to have heavy Sunday morning duties (we discovered weekends!), Sunday was also a rather empty, lonely day. For a few weeks it was exciting to visit churches about which I had heard. For a short time, I sometimes went to two different services on a Sunday morning, not seeming to realize that I had lots of time to survey the local church scene. While some were interesting, we did not feel a part of the worship, not in any deep, connected way. Some say it is better to move away from the community where one served and know you need to start over, somewhere else. But our vocation, as best we were led, was to stay.

From time to time, there was an invitation from someone in our former church to take part in some activity, or to render a service. I was asked to participate in the dedication of an infant (as it developed, two infants, --I had officiated at the weddings of both sets of parents). They assured me this was with the invitation of the interim pastor. I called him, and he warmly confirmed this fact and also personally invited me. So we went and enjoyed being a part. This was my style, to put people off and be in touch with interim pastor, with whom I had good personal trust. I searched for a way to keep the spirit of the pastor's code without being legalistic about it, to be supportive of the pastor and responsive to the person before me. While I enjoyed that day of the dedication, for the good of all, those invitations were not frequent. When we would see people from the church, we would listen but refrain from all comment on any happenings, staff, or decisions the church was considering. From what they tell me, both interim pastor and permanent pastor feel the integrity of my support for them and desire to be appropriate.

After a year, the church called a new senior pastor. That pastor, Dr. Heather Entrekin is a good friend and a former member of the staff I led. She immediately invited us to come back and enter into the life of the church. However, we stayed away more than a year more, so that pastor and congregation could come together, and the first round of decisions could be made. Then we accepted her invitation and have been worshipping there for about a year now. We do not attend business meetings or accept election to any board or office. We do short term tasks when asked, if we are able, and do all we can to be supportive of our pastor from behind the scenes.

To the best of my ability, the promises made at the beginning and at the end of my being pastor of this congregation are being kept. God is richly blessing the ministry of my successor. It is a pleasure to see a church doing better after I finished my term of ministry than at times it did during it. While I delight to see many old friends, I am equally delighted to see an emerging generation of new Christians and members whom I need to get to know. We worship with hope.