



**Congregational  
Federation**

# **Non-Serving Ministers in Our Churches**

Guidance for Congregational Churches –  
and for Non-Serving Ministers in Congregational  
Churches

Now to each one the manifestation of  
the Spirit is given for the common good.

(1 Corinthians 12:7)

(NIV)

This pamphlet is a resource to support churches that have non-serving ministers in their membership. We know that this can be a wonderful resource for a church, but we also know that it can provide points of tension. This is a complex topic, and the contents of this pamphlet are merely a guide. However, it is important that we are aware of issues that may arise if things don't go well.

## Introduction

It is not unusual for a Congregational Church to have within its membership, or as part of its regular congregation, someone with ministerial training and experience who is not serving as the Minister with pastoral charge of that particular church.\* For example, this might include:

- A Congregational Minister who has retired at the end of a lifetime's service;
- A retired minister from another denomination;
- Someone who has had to retire early on health grounds;
- Someone serving, or who has served, in one of the other recognised ministries within the Congregational Federation (CF).

Such individuals can be excellent resource persons for local churches, whether or not there is someone with pastoral charge. The dynamics and possibilities for service will differ in these two situations, but the possibility of benefiting from non-serving individuals is there.



## Why have these guidelines been prepared?

Although there is no doubt that individuals with ministerial training and experience can be a great asset for a church, experience shows that sometimes situations can develop that are less than helpful and that can be difficult to resolve without people being hurt.

Pastoral leadership of churches is not an easy responsibility, and many factors can make the role stressful and demanding. We pray for respectful, loving relationships and mutual service in all our churches. We pray that Ministers will find that they are actively supported by deacons, elders (where appropriate), and the Church Meeting, and also vice versa.

These guidelines are provided to encourage good practice in contexts where there may be some strain. The scenarios presented here are all based on actual situations that have arisen in many churches, across denominations, including Congregational churches.

\* For the sake of brevity the pamphlet refers only to 'Ministers'. However, it includes locally recognised 'Pastors' every bit as much.

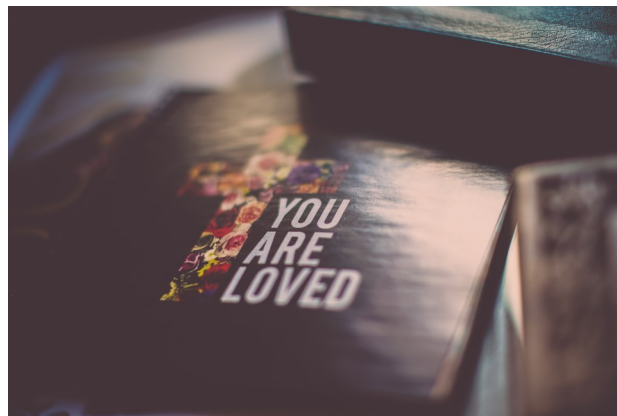
## What potential difficulties should churches be aware of?

Ministers have to make decisions regarding a wide range of matters on a day to day basis. Not every decision may meet with approval by everyone. It may also be the case that the Minister's style of leading worship, or other aspects of church life, does not reflect the style of everyone.

Ministers may excel in particular aspects of the role (e.g. pastoral visitation, teaching and preaching), making that a high priority. However, this might be seen by others as being at the expense of other aspects of ministry which are more important to *them*.

In situations like the above, it is unhelpful when one Minister is compared to another, and this can happen in churches where there is a serving Minister and also another person with ministerial training and experience. In the worst-case scenario, discontented members of a church can be looking for an alternative, and may feel that they have found an ally, or even a champion, who shares their views.

Occasionally, a non-serving minister will respond positively to this, compromising the position of the Minister. But often, they find themselves inadvertently caught up in this kind of church tension. Either way, promises and commitments can be made that raise expectations among some, but which prove to be untenable or inappropriate for good reasons.



If the non-serving minister had not served as a local church Minister, they may not really appreciate the situation, and if they *did* serve local churches, there can be a tendency to imagine how they might do something differently to the current Minister. This can result in resentments from both the Minister and the non-serving minister.

Even in situations where the Minister and the other person are mature individuals with a desire to respect and love one another in Christ, and so where there is no brooding resentment, there can still develop an awkwardness which is unnecessary, unedifying and may still prove hurtful.

## How can a non-serving minister be helpful to a Minister and a church?

There are some basic guidelines that are applicable in every situation. If you *are* someone who has ministerial training and experience and you become a member or adherent of a Congregational church, assess the situation before you volunteer your services or agree to an invitation to provide your services. Test your willingness to serve in the same way that we expect all church members to approach decisions for the church. That is to say:

- spend quality time in prayer about the situation, seeking the mind of Christ and the prompting of the Holy Spirit;
- ensure that it is the welfare of the church that you are seeking, not your own desire to be involved in some kind of leadership or influencing role;
- if there is a serving Minister with pastoral charge of the church, ensure that you will be willing to defer to the Minister with genuine grace and support;
- whether or not there is a serving Minister, commit yourself to respecting and supporting all those who have been appointed as officers in the church;
- if the church has no Minister, or is preparing for an interregnum, commit yourself to helping the church to discern for itself the direction of God for the church.



## How can church members be helpful to their Minister in these situations?

You need to remember that the church invited this Minister to have pastoral charge and inducted her/him. You sought the mind of Christ and the prompting of the Holy Spirit in this, and so you must be careful not to act in ways that would compromise that trust in God and that commitment to the person called.

Also, remember that your Minister is just as human as everyone else, and will appreciate a sense of support and trust. They will feel hurt, and perhaps, in serious situations, betrayed, if some members of the church compromise that support.

This does not mean blind obedience to the Minister. If members of the church genuinely believe that there are difficulties, they should approach this as mature Christians, finding a way to discuss this with the Minister. This can be done individually and respectfully, and if that is unsuccessful, the issue can be shared with the deacons and elders (where appropriate). In an extreme situation, the Church Meeting is the appropriate context for significant debate and decision.

The point is to be open and honest within the church family. On no account should another person, even one with ministerial training and experience, be looked to for alternative authority and leadership.

## **What may happen if things do go wrong?**

First of all, we need to remember that differences of opinion, even if strongly held, are not in themselves evidence that something has gone wrong. In the Congregational perspective of church, with our focus on the priesthood of all believers, differences of opinion are to be expected and respected.

Things can go wrong when certain individuals or a group in a church want to see things done in a particular way, even if this is not the will of others. When that results in constant sniping at the Minister, or at the deacons if there is no Minister, and an undercurrent of criticism is felt in the church, then a problem has developed.

If that discontent person or group latch onto a trained and experienced non-serving minister, this can become an aggravating factor in the discontent and damage. At the very least, a number of people may be badly hurt and trust in one another will become weakened. More seriously, some people may resign from posts that they held in the church, be it as a deacon, Sunday School teacher, coffee maker after services, or whatever.

If things go badly wrong, this can have very serious consequences.

- Situations that carry on for some time can generate disturbing levels of stress for Ministers, and on occasion this has led to a breakdown in their health, or in the health of their spouse.
- Some people may leave the church altogether.
- Relatively minor issues, or matters that are only seen as 'issues' by a small number of people, can escalate sharply and quickly, leading to situations where Ministers feel that they can no longer continue, and leave the church
- Wider attention can be created, exacerbating the situation for everyone and bringing not only the church community but also the Gospel into disrepute.



## **What can be done if things go wrong?**

The most important thing is for members of the church, including the Minister and the person with ministerial training and experience, to be praying as intently as they can for a resolution of the problem.

A major aspect of these prayers has to be that the person praying will be prepared to accept the point of view that is agreed by the church, even if it is not their preferred view. When we are ready to prefer one another, as Paul encourages the Philippians, then the church will be able to move on. The difficulties will still need to be resolved, but resolution, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, will be possible.

If things seem to have gone beyond the possibility of resolution within the church community, then seek support from a discerning friend.

- This needs to be a genuine friend: someone who loves the church as a whole, whose sole desire is to be a facilitator of open, loving, prayerful fellowship and progress in the church, and who has no personal agenda of any sort.
- But this person also needs to be discerning, with the experience and wisdom to be able to see what is going on, who the main characters are, and what is likely to be needed in order to resolve the issue. They also need to have the courage to speak the truth, as they see it, in love.

There are three possible persons that may be approached for this kind of confidential, caring, experienced support.

- There is the General Secretary of the CF. This person may prove to be the best one, in the sense that they are least likely to have any personal history with your church.
- The Area has a Pastoral Care Coordinator whose role includes supporting churches in situations like this. However, that person may be relatively well known to some of the church.
- There may be an experienced and wise Minister in another church who would be trusted and respected by the church membership as a whole.

Contacting one of these three persons above may prove to be the best way forward for the church.

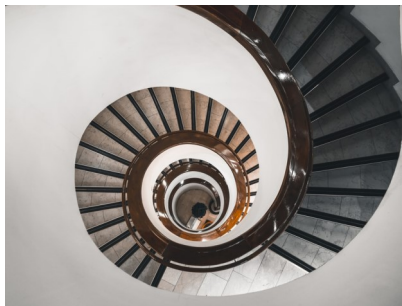


## **Prevention is better than a cure: recommendations for non-serving ministers to consider**

- It is perhaps better if a retired or previous minister does not remain within the church where they have served if they are planning to remain in the vicinity. Sometimes a church, or some members within it, might invite that person to stay as a member, but this is usually in ignorance of the potential difficulties. It is usually wiser for the person graciously to decline such an invitation.



- It would be gracious and appropriate for a non-serving minister who is becoming part of a local Congregational church to be proactive and talk in confidence with the Minister, if there is one, and any successive Ministers. This will enable that person to ascertain the Minister's feelings about their presence and involvement within the life of the church.
- If you are a non-serving minister, you should perhaps take particular care regarding your participation in Church Meetings. Your voice is a legitimate part of the church, of course, but some people may give undue weight to it.
- If you are a non-serving minister, it is perhaps wiser not to allow yourself to stand for any position of leadership, except where there is clearly no role conflict and where those properly appointed to the leadership of the church have indicated a desire for you to be part of that team.
- If you are a non-serving minister and you find yourself at variance with the position taken by those appointed to leadership of the church, you should take particular care not to become a focus for discontent among any members of the church.
- If you are a non-serving minister and you find yourself uncomfortable with the position or direction taken by those appointed to leadership there, the best thing may well be graciously to leave the church and seek a new spiritual home.



## Keep in Touch

Keep in touch with the opportunities for ongoing support and development that are provided through the church support department of the CF. If you have any questions or comments regarding this, please contact:

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