

Ministers Not in Pastoral Charge

HELPFUL GUIDANCE FOR CONGREGATIONAL CHURCHES AND MINISTERS
FOR THE COMMON GOOD

What is a “Minister not in Pastoral Charge”?

It is not unusual for a Congregational Church to have within its membership or regular congregation a minister who has not been appointed to the Oversight of that particular church. For example, this might include:

- a. A Congregational Minister who has retired at the end of a lifetime’s service
- b. A retired minister from another denomination
- c. Someone who has had to retire early on health grounds
- d. Someone serving in chaplaincy
- e. Someone whose ministry role is a national or Area role
- f. An ex-missionary

Such persons are almost always deserving of respect because of the ministry they have exercised or are exercising, but their role is distinct from that of the Minister appointed to the role of a pastoral leader of the church where they are in fellowship.

Why have these guidelines been prepared?

Ministers not in pastoral charge can prove a great asset within a church. A helpful collegiate relationship can exist. However, there have been occasions in some churches in various denominations when such faithful servants have found themselves inadvertently drawn into situations or cast into roles that are unhelpful. These notes are offered to encourage best practice where a minister not in pastoral charge is within a church. It is hoped that this will prove to be for the good of all concerned.

Pastoral Leadership can be difficult

Pastoral leadership of churches is not an easy task and there can be many factors that occasionally make the role stressful and demanding. Across the denominations the “casualty rate” for ministers has sometimes been a cause for concern. If a Minister is fortunate he or she will find himself or herself supported by a good team of deacons and perhaps elders with whom he or she can share much of the load. A Minister would also be grateful to find a congregation that appreciates the challenges of the role and where Church Meetings are collaborative rather than confrontational and contentious. A retired minister will almost certainly appreciate this, though with the passage of time or in different locations pastoral ministry might be very different from their own experience. If there is a minister within a church who has never had local church ministry responsibility it is possible that they might not fully understand how challenging that role can be.

What kind of problems might develop?

Pastoral leadership of a church is not a precise science. The Minister of a church makes decisions regarding a wide range of matters on a day to day basis. Similarly styles of ministry, forms of worship etc vary. Some ministers excel in pastoral visitation and might make that a high priority. Others may have skills in preaching and teaching or in other aspects of ministry.

It is unhelpful when one Minister or ministry is compared to another.

For various reasons where a minister has retired after a lifetime of experience in pastoral leadership some find it very difficult to take a back seat. There can be tendencies to imagine how he or she might do something differently to the one in pastoral charge. If it is particularly important then a gentle and discreet conversation between the two might be helpful. But this is dangerous ground and it calls for particular grace for a retired minister not to nurture unhealthy attitudes or a desire to interfere or influence, especially in the first few years after retirement.

But a greater danger exists from any discontented members of a church on the look out for allies. If a member or members of a congregation not in sympathy with the direction in which the church is being led, or not in sympathy with the style of worship, for example, can find a minister who either shares their opinions or is willing to act as an advocate for them, then there is a potential problem brewing for the Minister and others appointed to leadership responsibility.

In such a situation it is not uncommon for a minister not in pastoral charge to find himself or herself becoming the point behind which discontented members muster in order to express their disapproval. It is all too easy to inadvertently find oneself caught up in general periodic murmurings or worse still as part of a lobby at a Church Meeting. Of course, an experienced minister will recognise the early signs of such dangers and nip it in the bud.

How can a minister not in pastoral charge be helpful?

Within our Christian tradition we take seriously the issue of the calling and appointment to a Minister charged with the pastoral care of a congregation. The process is usually accompanied with much prayer and careful deliberation. A decision is ultimately reached by both a Church Meeting and the Minister, both of whom seek to have confidence that they are acting under the guidance of God.

Similar prayerful consideration should also be given to the appointment of Church Officers and Diaconate who support the Minister, sharing with him or her concern for the welfare of the whole church.

Once in office we expect them to act prayerfully and carefully for the good of the church and God's kingdom. It is of supreme importance that any minister not in pastoral charge shows and reinforces respect for those so appointed. In many situations they will have a grasp of the bigger situation that will have informed a decision taken.

Guard against negativity. In these days it is all too easy for a few careless words to undermine confidence in those properly appointed to lead. The outcome has been known to be extremely painful.

Such interventions have been known to generate disturbing levels of stress experienced by Ministers. There are also many occasions where health breaks down or for other reasons the role cannot be sustained. Sadly this can sometimes only be described as a form of abuse and, as an employing body, church members should be careful regarding conduct. As Christians we should, of course, honour and respect one another properly.

Of course no Minister is perfect and all-wise. But public criticism should be avoided. Having an experienced or wise colleague within church membership will be an asset where care is taken not to interfere and where any opinions privately expressed are done with grace. This calls for sensitivity and empathy.

Some Recommendations

1. A retiring or recently previous minister should consider not remaining within the church where they have exercised leadership or pastoral ministry. Years of experience has shown that remaining can cause much hurt. At times a loving congregation might request a continuance as an ordinary member, but this is usually in ignorance of the potential dangers. It is wiser to be gracious and step aside properly.

In these days there might not be another Congregational church conveniently nearby. In which case, the opportunity to experience a different Christian tradition might be a new and enjoyable experience.

2. It would be healthy for a minister not in pastoral charge becoming part of a church to talk privately and in confidence with the person who has the pastoral oversight in order to ascertain his or her feelings about your presence and involvement within the life of a church. The process should also be repeated where any new-Minister is appointed.

3. If you are a minister not in pastoral charge and you are a church member please take care regarding your participation in Church Meetings. You can always express your personal opinion when a vote is taken. If a matter under consideration is controversial or potentially contentious it would probably be better for you not to publicly voice your opinion - certainly if it is at variance with the opinion of those who have been prayerfully appointed to lead the church.

As a positive action (if necessary), since difficult items of business are known in advance, you could always seek an opportunity for a discreet, gentle and gracious conversation with the leadership in advance, but see point six.

4. If you are a minister not in pastoral charge it is wiser not to allow yourself to stand for a 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 the team. But be careful to manage the boundaries between roles.

5. If a matter under consideration by a church is of such significance that a minister not in pastoral charge feels compelled to communicate concerns on the subject to those properly appointed to the leadership of the church then it would be done best only as a written submission to the deaconate or eldership (if there is one) rather than by seeking to be present at a meeting where the

matter would be discussed. To seek to attend would be to act as a de facto deacon or similar, and by discussion and reasoning influencing an outcome in a role to which you have not been properly appointed.

Following this advice would not prevent the second part of recommendation four.

6. Where a Minister not in pastoral charge finds himself or herself at variance with the position taken by those appointed to leadership of the local church he or she should take particular care not to become a focus for discontent among members of the church.

7. Where a minister not in pastoral charge finds himself or herself uncomfortable within the local church because they do not support the position or direction taken by those appointed to leadership there, the most sensible thing may well be to leave the church graciously and seek a new spiritual home. Remaining as a discontented member might not be healthy for anyone.

Where a former Minister has moved away.

Once a former Minister has left the church where he/she had served, special care should be taken to avoid interfering with the affairs of that church, no matter how good the motivation might be.

It is understandable that a former minister might still feel concern for the life of the church. Similarly members of the church might hold a former Minister in respect and wish to seek advice. However any such interference or influence in the affairs of a church would be contrary to fundamental Congregational principles where it is through the Church Meeting that wisdom and guidance from the Holy Spirit is sought. Such interference or influence would be unwise and inappropriate whether or not another person had been appointed to succeed him/her as Minister.

Were a former Minister to act inappropriately in this regard, whether he/she had initiated such involvement or was acting in response to members of the church, there would be potential risk to the health of that congregation and the former Minister would be risking his/ her reputation and future ministry. To be a Congregational Minister implies understanding and respect for Congregational governance and any contrary act would be viewed very seriously by the Pastoral Care Board.

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