

SANDIA IN TRANSITION

WHY ARE WE HERE?

In recent pastor's columns Dewey has explained the requirements and reasoning that led Cheri and Dewey to seek a call at another church, but there may be some uncertainty about the underlying reasons for some of the guidelines involved, especially for those of us not from longtime Presbyterian backgrounds.

The rules requiring a pastor to sever ties—for a certain amount of time—with the previous church upon retirement are not unique to the PC(USA), although they are not applied in some Christian denominations. While such policies may seem harsh for the outgoing pastor, they actually are solidly based on experience with countless congregations, and they are designed to let the new pastor truly pastor the congregation and bond with it. Without such rules, retired pastors sometimes cannot avoid meddling in the affairs and decisions of the church under new leadership, even if such influence is not exerted directly but instead occurs behind the scenes through old friends who look to him/her for guidance. If the previous pastor is hanging around, changes may seem disloyal to longtime parishioners who maintain frequent contact. Also, if congregation members continually request that the previous pastor perform weddings, baptisms, and funerals, the new pastor will not truly become part of the life of the congregation. Such pitfalls are especially likely when a pastor has been with the congregation for 20+ years and founded it. Even though we know Dewey would not meddle, the rules are universally applied, for the protection of all—no exceptions for any pastor, however honorable. And while the rules specify a minimum 6-month separation, the reality is that a senior/founding pastor like Dewey would need to stay away for some years, until his long-term replacement is well established.

Thus, a retired senior pastor who stays in the same community often endures a sort of exile-at-home, unable to worship with the old congregation or to feel free to enjoy frequent association with former parishioners. However, if the pastor leaves for a few years, long enough for a new pastor to become established, he/she may return and worship and hang out freely with friends without fear of meddling. Dewey and Cheri eventually will be able to retire here without guilt or restrictions.

Similar wisdom went into creating the rules that prevent David Casson from stepping into the role of senior pastor. Many churches endure power struggles and conflicts among the leadership and within the congregation, and these rules prevent a sort of clerical coup that ousts one pastor and promotes the surviving one. Again, this is not the situation at Sandia, but the rules apply to all congregations and clergy, not just the warring ones, for the protection of all.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Sandia first needs to find a transitional pastor to shepherd the congregation through the process of examining and deciding in what direction(s) the congregation wishes to go for the next several years. A committee representing diverse interests within our congregation, advised by a liaison from our Presbytery's Committee on Ministry, has

been formed to advertise our requirements for a transitional pastor, evaluate the candidates who respond, and ultimately recommend a candidate to the Session, Sandia's governing body. While the process may begin before Dewey leaves, a transitional pastor cannot be called until Dewey is gone. Typically the process of finding and calling a transitional pastor takes several months—a much shorter time than the more involved process of finding the permanent replacement pastor. Until the transitional pastor arrives, David Casson and Suzanne Ebel will assume increased leadership and preaching responsibilities—such temporary changes are allowed under PC(USA) rules. Suzanne will probably postpone slightly her planned December 2009 retirement.

The transitional pastor will have specialized training in helping congregations through the process of grieving, questioning, visioning, and finally calling a new pastor to match the updated congregational vision. The transitional pastor will not be eligible to become the permanent pastor here, which in some ways is a shame, because congregations often become fond of good transitional pastors. But again, the rules protect a congregation from potentially destructive interference by a transitional pastor, who would have sidestepped the more involved permanent-pastor selection process, from deciding to stay on and shape the congregation to fit his/her vision instead of helping the congregation to find its own vision.

Once the transitional pastor is chosen and installed, our Nominating Unit will propose a search committee, called a Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC), to find the permanent pastor, and the congregation will vote to approve this committee. Part of the work of the transitional pastor will be to hold meetings and survey the ministry units and the congregation to gain input and consensus on the sort of pastor we will seek. This information-gathering and decision-making process will culminate in the creation of a Mission Study to summarize the congregation's strengths, passions, and hopes. This document will guide the criteria and descriptions used to advertise the position in a Church Information Form (CIF) prepared by the PNC, and both it and the CIF will be made available to prospective candidates to help them assess whether they are a good fit for our congregation.

Once we know what sort of pastor we are seeking and advertise the position, the PNC will spend many months evaluating written responses, conducting phone interviews, and bringing top candidates here for interviews and an off-site worship service. The chosen candidate will be presented to the congregation for approval, including leading a worship service at Sandia before the vote. Sometimes there is no clear choice, and the process may have to resume/repeat. Searches typically take 1-2 years, so settle in...

Throughout the entire process our other staff, session, and volunteers will continue conducting Sandia's various ministries. Congregational life will continue much as always, except that we will miss Dewey and Cheri.