



WISCONSIN  
CONFERENCE  
UNITED CHURCH  
OF CHRIST

## Clergy Retirement in a Different Light

*By Rev. Rob MacDougall*

A group of teachers were talking about some of the things that were going right at their elementary school. They reminded each other that they needed to speak about the good things that gave them energy and encouragement. It didn't take any of them more than a breath to say one of the best things at the school was all the retired teachers who were coming around to volunteer. They were volunteering to read with kids, create bulletin boards, monitor halls, do one-to-one tutoring and more. The volunteer retired teachers had become so vital to the school that the principal created a lounge/lunch room just for them.



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It gave me pause to hear the story of this school. The teaching staff was not threatened by the veteran retirees; they welcomed them and helped establish appropriate places for them to show their talents. It caused me to think about several retired clergy I have known who struggled in retirement to find their place in the churches that they loved and served.

Clergy retirement and the accompanying ethics are more complicated than in other professions. Navigating relationships, communities, predecessors, successors, personal needs and the needs of the church all add up to an incredible puzzle of boundary and involvement decisions. Because personalities and congregations are complicated the church has often decided that the best way to handle retired clergy is to instruct them to leave and end contacts with the people they have come to know and care about. Sometimes clergy have a hard time letting go of their position in the church and full separation between the congregation and their pastor needs to happen. But the reality is that many retired clergy continue relationships with people in the churches they have served and some would like to worship in those churches after a time of separation.

At the September meeting of the Commission on Church and Ministry for the Wisconsin Conference more than one person commented that there have been several clergy retirements from long-term pastorates and there were soon to be more. With these retirements there would be the loss of many skilled ministers, particularly if these ministers were simply being asked to leave. It was reported that more than one retired minister had started worshiping in a church of another tradition because they did not

know how to find their place back in their former church. These were troubling thoughts for the UCC and for the wellbeing of our pastors.

The suggestion was made that our Conference begin looking at models for retired clergy, settled clergy and congregations to negotiate new relationships. Studies and anecdotal evidence indicate that the two most important factors in negotiating new faithful and life-giving relationships have to do with clarity and follow through; clarity regarding roles, involvements, communications and authority, and follow through regarding the decisions that have been clarified in the above ways.

One model found in our Search and Call Manual is that of Pastor Emeritus. The manual lists this as an honorary position in a church from which a pastor has retired. The honor is conferred after a settled pastor has been installed. The conferring of emeritus status should include a brief and clear description of what this honor designates and the congregation, settled pastor and retired pastor should all agree to the description as delineated. This designation has been in existence for many years and has proven to be a gift to churches and clergy alike.

Prayerful and thoughtful consideration by clergy and churches around retired clergy gifts and concerns is of deep importance. Faithful people have lovingly addressed complicated matters throughout the centuries and it is time for us to open ourselves to the possibilities that exist in the season of clergy retirement. As the Associate Conference Minister charged with particular responsibilities to and with retired clergy, I look forward to hearing your thoughts and experiences regarding these vitally important members of our church.