

Sunday morning blues

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 21, 2013](#) issue



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An elderly church member became a dear friend to my wife and me over the years. One of the last things I did before retiring was bring the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to this woman. Sue came along. When that church member died at age 102, I wanted with everything in me to be part of the church's celebration of her life and joyful affirmation of the resurrection. But as a newly retired pastor, I honored our denomination's policy and stayed home.

My denomination requires retiring clergy to promise not to interfere in any way in the life of the congregation they left. They don't preside at weddings, funerals or baptisms and under no condition do they offer advice or become involved in decisions and conflicts. The assumption is that the retiring minister will not be present in the life of the congregation in any activity until the successor is established and invites the former pastor to return.

I understand the policy and support it wholeheartedly; I've seen the unhappy results when it's not honored. But staying away has been more difficult than I anticipated. A year after I retired I was leading a workshop when a participant asked me what I missed most about ministry. I remembered Barbara Brown Taylor's book *Leaving Church* in which she said that she missed baptisms, beautiful infants, hopefully earnest young parents, and little children hugging her knees after worship. I began my own list right there, and in front of 30 professionals I was so overcome with emotion that I couldn't continue.

Nobody warned me how much I would miss all this, or if they did, I wasn't listening. On most Sunday mornings during the last 50 years I was awake before dawn, suiting up in my uniform—a dark suit, black polished shoes, and clergy shirt with collar, brewing coffee, glancing at the headlines of the *Times* and then heading off to work. I loved it. Now what am I supposed to do on Sunday mornings? It's a tired adage, but I feel like the racehorse on race day, stomping around in its stall when the bell rings and the gate flies open.

My wife and I decided to keep our Chicago residence. There are compelling personal reasons for doing so. This means that I walk by the church on Michigan Avenue every day. Every time I do, something tugs at my heart.

To make matters more painful, my wife and I experienced a serious health setback around the time I retired, and we needed the support of the community as never before. Yes, there were phone calls and helpful, caring visits, but we missed the constant, familiar strength of the congregation we love.

One thing I have learned from this experience is something I should have learned long ago: ministry is not my personal possession. Ministry belongs to the church, the congregation I served for a while, the denomination of which it is a part—and to the whole church, holy, catholic, apostolic. In the painful process of letting go I am learning to let the church continue to be the church, performing a ministry that began before it allowed me to serve and continuing after I left.

So every Sunday morning I join my voice with the people of God today and throughout the ages who say together: "I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints . . ."