

Pastors: Help your successor succeed

By [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#)

October 8, 2013

I was planning to write about my predecessor in ministry, and then I read Jan Edmiston's post, ["Please. Get Some Non-Church Friends,"](#) which is about much the same thing. Here's a personal perspective from the other side—not as the pastor who retires, but as the pastor coming after that pastor.

I hit the jackpot in terms of predecessors. J was pastor of the church I serve for almost 30 years. When he retired, he *retired*. He maintained good distance during the interim process, and when I first arrived four years ago, we got together so he could wish me well and make clear that he had no intention of inserting himself into the day-to-day operation of the church.

Here are a few things that retiring (or otherwise departing) pastors can do to help those who will come after them.

1. Please, please. Make the most of your retirement. As Jan said, some people find themselves floundering in retirement. That's understandable on one level. Ministry is a lifestyle and can be all encompassing. But with all due respect, it's on you to find friends, interests, hobbies and a ministry to engage in. How does this help the pastors who will follow you? Let's just say that J is having way too much fun to get sucked into the particulars of life at the church. He still cares for the people, but the administrivia? The inner workings of session? *Please*.

2. Know whom to call. J has maintained warm relationships with a few people in the church. I appreciate this, because they are friendships, not pastoral relationships. But sometimes people call him in a pastoral capacity. I don't take this personally. Old habits are hard to break, and what good would it do me to feel threatened? But I do appreciate that in those cases, I'm his first phone call. This happened just recently, when our dear patriarch of the church was near death. It was my day off and I had a car full of girls on the way to choir and didn't get the call right away. When a church member couldn't get me, she tried him. By that time I had picked up the message and was doing the mad minister-mom scramble to figure

out how to get the girls taken care of so I could speed over to the hospital. When he called me I was able to say, "I'm on it."

3. Blame the policy, not your successor. In the PCUSA at least, it's the norm for a departing pastor to step aside and no longer fulfill pastoral roles. Keep any attempts to draw you back into that role focused on the norms, not the personalities involved. That is, say stuff like "This is the practice of our denomination and why," not "Mean old Pastor Jane-come-lately won't let me bury your beloved great aunt."

4. Be your successor's biggest fan. I know for a fact that J sings my praises to church folks he does come in contact with. This is a choice and a practice on his part, and I deeply appreciate it. This helps inoculate him from any attempts at triangulation.

5. Share stories and information that might be useful. A member of the church passed away earlier this year. By the time I met her, she was at the very beginning of some dementia, so I never got to know her as the force of nature that she truly was. J is a great source of information and stories, and he shares these freely.

6. Give your successor a wide berth in terms of colleague relationships.

There's a group of Presbyterian pastors in my area of town who get together for lunch once a month. J intentionally stayed away from this group for a year or two so I could get to know them without him lurking about. He probably would have stayed away longer if I'd asked, but the truth is, he's a great part of that group and I enjoy his company.

7. Come back when asked. J preached while I was away a few times this summer, and people loved having him there. I'm not threatened by his presence because of how he's conducted himself regarding numbers one through six on this list.

Here's the irony of being a good predecessor. I know pastors who never really leave a congregation, which puts the next pastor in a terrible position of having to impose boundaries and thus be "the bad guy." Because J is so clear about who he is and who he is not, I feel *more* free to invite him to participate in the life of our congregation. By letting go, you are invited in.

Originally posted at [The Blue Room](#)