

CAN PASTORS BE FRIENDS?

On December 27, 2012 *The Christian Century* posted an article on line that caught my eye... and my gut; *"Pastor, not Friend"* by M. Craig Barnes. Barnes writes:

"When I knelt to receive the laying on of hands before I was ordained, the elders of the congregation were being led by the Holy Spirit to push me away from them. They were essentially saying, 'We are setting you apart to serve us. So you can't be just one of the gang anymore. Now you have to love us enough to no longer expect mutuality'."

I remember hearing that line of thinking in pastoral ministry classes in seminary many decades ago. It is reinforced to a degree by pastoral ethics statements that clergy usually follow.

This was long before Facebook asked you to be "Friends" with everyone. Many pastors have their whole congregation listed as "friends." All friends are not created equal. Pastors can be friends, but not too friendly, I guess.

The article will speak to every practicing pastor. I suspect that it also speaks to many professions where leaders must develop meaningful connections in which function is not confused by tight friendships. We all know what Barnes is talking about.

Having moved from three congregations during my career, I tried to follow all the ethical and proper professional ministerial processes. In each case I had a feeling of mistreating some close friends. I have had some feedback that they neither understood nor agreed with the standard policy that clergy should not have or continue friendships with members of a previous parish after leaving. Every practicing pastor has probably had difficulty from a previous pastor maintaining some kinds of contact even years after leaving. There is good reason for established guidelines.

My gut is not agreeing with my logical and pastorally ethical mind. I'm trying to figure what's bothering me.

Is it true that a pastor must not have personal friendships within his congregation? Whether right or wrong, you stay in a place long enough and you come to a point where you say, *"I no longer call you 'my parishioner,' I call you 'friends.'"* I got the idea that Jesus came to the same point in his relationships. *"I call you friends."*

When Barnes uses ordination as the point of diminishing friendships I'm wondering whether it is not perpetuation of a special clergy class of friendship, an affirmation of a distinction between clergy and laity, an extension of the very separation the Reformation sought to do away with. Is that what I want? Do I believe in that?

It happens. Of course all friendships are different in degrees of closeness. And as with any profession, there are aspects of a profession that are not part of the friendship relationship. A lawyer or doctor or accountant does not talk about his other clients. And a good friend does not gossip about other friends. And so on. And a definite hazard for pastors in congregations is when "friends" betray the relationship in some way, sometimes to the detriment of the minister and the church.

So the time comes when one considers going to another church. The only times I have gone to another church was when invited. I've never sought to relocate. Most invitations were rejected, but a couple hooked me. In the courtship process I felt sort of like a cheating spouse. I didn't tell anyone I was even being talked to. When an invitation came my congregations didn't have a chance to make a counter proposal. I never believed God "called" me away from one place to another. Maybe my present church was happy to see me go. But I got the idea in each occasion that they felt rejection. They were more gracious in letting me go than I was in scheming my exit. Does God "un-call?"

In each case I left dear friends with whom I had shared a lot of life. It didn't feel good. And still doesn't.

For the past 35 years I haven't had any parishioners. I have a practice called "Moment Ministries." I'm not employed and have no institutional connections. These are mostly friends. From time to time I perform a pastoral function in their lives. This article may be a subject of conversation among some of us. I want to see what our relationship really is. Am I still able to be a friend who is also a pastor?

I send out a blue sheet under the heading of *MM Email Blue Sheet* (Moment Ministries). Quite a few on that list have appeared out of my past pastoral connections. I wonder what they think of our relationship now. Some were, and are, clergy colleagues. Most on my list never knew me as a pastor. I think that my writing tends to have a "pastoral" tone to it. And responses are sometime like pastoral conversations. Some have called me their "pastor."

I aspire to be a friend. Friendship has many dimensions. I think, given a choice, I would rather be a friend who is a pastor than a pastor who is a friend. Does that make sense to anyone?

It occurs to me that many have asked me to be a Facebook "friend," but except for occasionally being called upon for a pastoral function, the category of choice remains "friend." I like that.

— Art Morgan, December 28, 2012