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TEN COMMANDMENTS
for Pastors Leaving a Congregation

Lawrence W. Farris

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In Gratitude to

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*Pastors creative and faithful
with whom I have been privileged to journey*

church whenever he wished. This call turned out to be the first of several visits by the new pastor, and a friendship soon blossomed between Mark and his successor. Mark felt his advice, when requested, was appreciated. Over time, he was asked to preach on occasion and to do some pastoral calling. He also did the occasional funeral, mostly for community folks who were not members of his former church. After about a year, Mark asked that his responsibilities be clearly delineated by the church board, and this request was honored. And his successor was blessed to have found both a mentor and a wise, supportive friend in his own congregation.

IN GENERAL, after an initial supportive contact with one's successor, maintaining distance from the former congregation, both physically and emotionally, is a wise and prudent choice for a departed pastor. This frees the former congregation to enter into the work of developing a good relationship with its new pastor, and it frees the former pastor to develop such a relationship with his or her new congregation. While it may not always be true that "good fences make good neighbors," to quote Robert Frost's famous poem, there are times when this is most assuredly so. Setting appropriate behavioral boundaries with a former congregation is crucial for the well-being of everyone involved. There may very well be times when a former pastor is invited back — an anniversary celebration or building dedication, for example. If appropriate boundaries have been observed, these will be occasions of even greater joy, as when two old friends greet each other after a long separation.

Thou Shalt Grieve

"Grieve, but not as those who have no hope."

I THESSALONIANS 4:13B

You have done all your farewells. You have left good feelings and good summaries behind. You have done what you can to resolve conflict and reconcile relationships. You have looked to the needs of your self, your friends, and your family. You have stayed away once you have left. There is only one more task necessary in order to leave well.

You must grieve.

Perhaps it feels like this is exactly what you have been doing all through the process of leaving. And truly, many of the actions laid out in these commandments will help with the essential parts of grief work. But some grieving can only be done once the separation is completed, the move is made, and the former context is gone.

Grieving does not come easily in our culture. After a loss of any kind — the death of a loved one, a miscarriage, the loss of a job, an empty nest — the message people often receive, even from well-meaning church members, is,

“Aren’t you over that yet?” This response is so deeply ingrained that we sometimes even ask the question of ourselves! But the Bible teaches something different: that the appropriate response to a loss is grief.

After the tragic and horrifying events of September 11, 2001, well-intentioned national leaders urged citizens to “get back to normal” as quickly as possible, to go shopping, to go to sporting events, to take vacations. On the whole, the message seemed to be, “Don’t grieve. Don’t take all the time necessary to deal with the deep, life-altering losses that have befallen us all.” Surely a new way of seeing our nation’s role in the world was needed, but this could only be found if we first grieved: grieved not only the loss of so many lives, but also our illusion that the great oceans to our east and west somehow insulate us from the rest of the world. The denial of loss only buries the hurt, and such responses are utterly inappropriate for Christians who know the path to new life must always lead to the cross and through the tomb. We do not worship a God who is a cheerleader on the sidelines of life, urging us to get over our losses as quickly as possible. We worship a God who accompanies us through life’s valleys and through those days shadowed by loss.

And yet once we are in retirement or serving with a new congregation, there is an understandably strong temptation to throw ourselves — heart, mind, body, and soul — into the new challenges. So much to learn, so many people to get to know, so many new possibilities! Who has time to grieve? The wise pastor, that’s who. The one who knows a pastoral transition is not finished at the completion of a physical move. The one who knows there

are feelings yet to experience, longings to talk over with loved ones, and perhaps a letter to be written.

As Pastor Angela settled in with her new congregation, she was pleased that her impressions of the church had been accurate and that many of her hopes for a new pastorate promised to be realized. She liked the people and sensed that some of them would become fast friends. The house she and her husband had bought had a big yard with room for the gardens she had longed to create. The congregation regularly expressed that they were delighted with her leading of worship, especially her preaching. She felt immensely grateful for her new position.

But she still woke up in the morning worrying about what else she might have done at her previous church. She missed her friends; phone calls, e-mails, and cards were a comfort, but just did not provide the same sense of connection. She had heard about old programs being altered, and new programs being put in place. She wondered if a certain couple would stick with much-needed counseling work to save their marriage. She agonized about a closeted gay man who had confided in her. Some of the aged and sick had died, and she missed the privilege of officiating at their funerals. The plain fact of never again seeing so many people she had cared for gnawed at her. Even though she had said her goodbyes well, she found lingering ties that bound her to the church she had loved serving for nine years.

Eventually, Angela mentioned these things to her husband, who responded that he wondered why she had been sleeping so poorly, given how hard she was working. They decided to take time once a week to sit down and share all they were missing — the people, places, and activities that

had shaped their previous life. They did this after dinner, with a cup of coffee and a candle burning before them. These conversations brought healing and relief through some tears, some laughter, some deep sighs, some long silences. And week by week they worked through some of the hurt and sense of loss until after a while the once-a-week sharing time began to happen every two weeks, then every three. And by the end of six months, they happened only as needed.

For those pastors who are parents, this kind of intentional sharing should certainly involve the children. Parents can help their children (and each other) by encouraging them to talk about their losses with as much detail as possible, so that larger, global feelings of loss can be gently moved to particular people, places, and activities. And the children should be allowed to adjust to the new location at their own pace. Appreciation of the new context will come in time, and be solidly held, if it is not forced or hurried.

Pastor Gene took a different approach. As part of his spiritual discipline, he wrote in his journal each morning and used many pages in the early days of his new pastorate to name what he was missing from his previous parish. This simple act drained away some of the strongest feelings and allowed him to engage his new work more fully. It also led him to write two letters to his former congregation. The first was overflowing with all the longings he had for his previous, beloved congregation. He went into great detail about individual members (and their quirks) that he missed and the small routines of his life that he missed as well: walking his dog by the river late at night to wind down after a meeting, stopping at a local coffee shop

on his way to the office each morning. This letter he wisely chose never to send, recognizing that it had helped him more to write it than it would his old congregation to read it.

Gene's second letter was much more considered. In it, he still shared a few of the things he missed most, but spent most of his words reiterating his gratitude for having had the privilege of serving the congregation, naming what he had learned while with them, and sharing some of the new possibilities that were before him at his new church. He closed with a benediction asking God's blessing on the congregation and its journey with its new pastor. He sent this letter to the pastor, requesting that it be printed in the church newsletter.

After writing these two letters, Gene also decided it would be wise to share some of his grieving with his new congregation. The church had a weekly newsletter, and Gene wrote a few short articles in it about his journey through grief. He shared how his faith spoke to each of the various aspects commonly experienced in response to any significant loss — disorientation, sadness, questioning, and restructuring. So that his new congregation would know that he also felt joy to be with them, Gene was careful to make sure he balanced these articles with others focused on discoveries and hopes and dreams for what lay ahead.

Gene was surprised by how strongly and favorably his new congregation reacted to his grief articles. He came to realize how many people had become conditioned either to hide their grief or to avoid it altogether. His honest sharing had clearly helped others understand the importance of grieving as an essential Christian activity. Even-

tually, he started a bereavement group for those experiencing any kind of loss. The group thrived, and eventually it took on a life of its own without needing Gene's continuing leadership. Gene's attentiveness to his own grief became a model of Christian grieving, and through it he learned just how important this aspect of ministry can be when so much of life is touched by grief, especially as we grow older.

Both Angela and Gene found ways to ritualize their grief — an essential task for dealing with the lingering emotional ties to a former church. Certainly pastors, who officiate at the rituals that mark the crucial turning points of life — baptism, confirmation, marriage, death — should know the importance of rituals for effective transitions. It is not only permissible but necessary to ritualize our own grief as well, even if the ritual is something small and private — some pastors, for example, hang a picture or two of previous churches in their office as a reminder to themselves of where they have been and to those who come by that the pastor has also had deep ties with other of God's people in other places.

Perhaps we would like to believe that endings and beginnings are clearly demarcated: "That was then, and this is now, and never the twain shall meet." But if we have worked with the dying in our pastoral ministry, we know better. In the dying process, there often comes a kind of bridging between this world and the next. Even while the dying person is still interacting with others around him, he may also be seeing or dreaming of loved ones who have preceded him in death, as if he has a foot in both worlds. Likewise, after we have lost a loved one, we often find ourselves still speaking to her or anticipating her phone

call or thinking of the next time we are together. These are all expected, natural parts of loss and grief.

It is no different in making a pastoral transition. Before we have concluded our service with the old congregation, our thoughts are turning to what the new congregation will be like. After we have arrived at the new field of service, we miss the old congregation like the old, worn bathrobe we never wanted to part with. Beginnings and endings are never clear-cut, and grief helps us recognize this.

ACCEPTING THAT GRIEF is a necessary part of pastoral change is a needed last step for successfully leaving a congregation. Take the necessary time to feel and respond to all that wells up within so that you can begin the task of creating new and rich memories in a new setting. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted," said Jesus (Matthew 5:4). And, as always, he knew whereof he spoke. No mourning, no comfort. And no freedom to give ourselves wholly to the new.