

“What a Pastor Needs from Her Congregation”

Ephesians 4:11-12

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

August 23, 2020

READ EPHESIANS 4:11-12

When the Apostle Paul wrote those words, there was, of course, only one Christian Church. There were many congregations, to be sure, but only one Christian Church: the Church of Jesus Christ. Jesus was Head of the One Church. That was the message that Paul and the other apostles were proclaiming—that in Jesus Christ, God had invested the power to transform Creation into a repository of compassion, justice, and love. Male and female, child and parent, Jew and Gentile, Roman and Palestinian—all are one family.

Over the centuries, God’s ideal of spiritual unity in Jesus Christ has been re-interpreted and re-fashioned in so many forms that the original Biblical version of it is unrecognizable, and quite likely unrecoverable. One form of the original vision is known as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Though we are members of that manifestation of the Church that honors Jesus Christ as its Head, many of us may not be aware that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) disciplines itself by what is published as “Ethical Guidelines for Congregational Conduct”. But there it is, in black and white, spelling out “What a Pastor Needs from Her Congregation”. All a CC congregation has to do is review Articles A through O, of section III of the Guidelines for Conduct.

In no particular order, let’s start with article G.

Let me tell you about Tom: He was President of the Church Council at the first congregation I served, fresh out of seminary, and with his father owned a business that supplied farmers with gas and oil for their machinery. Tom and I forged a friendship that has remained active for 50 years, getting

together for lunch almost every time I travel through Ohio. Sadly, Tom experienced the death of two sons, Jimmy and Dickie, as young adults, so he dolts on his daughter Wendy, who is in seminary now. Tom went off and got ordained years ago, too! When Tom was Council President, my predecessor Clarence, who was living in retirement 250 miles away, returned at the request of a church family to officiate at the funeral of their husband and father. Clarence led the service and left town before I even learned of the death. Tom was as displeased with this violation of professional ethics as I was. He communicated to my predecessor that such was not to happen again.

Section III, Article G of the CC Ethical Guidelines, reads thus: *"We will call on our present minister for weddings, funerals, and other special services. Our former ministers...may be invited to participate in such services only when appropriate and at the present minister's invitation."*

That is what a pastor needs from her congregation.

Let's continue with Article K.

Let me tell you about Bonnie: She, her husband Bill, and their kids were among our family's closest friends, in my second church. Bonnie and Bill escaped a fire that killed scores of people at a dinner theatre, and later had to rebuild after a fire in their own home. Bonnie's devotion to the church was total, her faith in God unshakable. Prepared by years of leadership as a laywoman, she would step in as secretary in the church office when needed. For the ministers, she was a loving critic and an honest advisor. For a long time, Bonnie's physical life has been altered by a debilitating disease. She begins every day, and retires every evening, from her wheelchair, without complaint. One of my treasured possessions is a prayer shawl that Bonnie made with her prayer circle of friends.

Section III, Article K of the CC Ethical Guidelines, reads thus: *"We will encourage and assist our minister through constructive feedback, appropriate praise, constant prayer, and faithful participation with him or her in ministry."*

That is what a pastor needs from her congregation.

Let's continue with Article E.

Let me tell you about Hank: I don't recall that Hank was ever Moderator of my third congregation, or head of any committee, but he was a loved and revered pillar of the church. Professionally, he was an executive of the old Sears, Roebuck Company, so offered unusual administrative ability to help lead the region-wide conferences we organized against war and nuclear proliferation. As kind and thoughtful as you can imagine, Hank was in worship in the same pew every Sunday morning. I learned, he listened to every word spoken from the pulpit, and took those words to heart. Years after I had departed from that congregation, Hank told me how appreciative he was of my message in a particular sermon—a sermon that I did not even remember preaching! Now, there seems to be a "Hank" in Hyattstown, who shall remain anonymous, except to reveal that he partnered with my grandson rebuilding the roof of a home in Puerto Rico! This local "Hank" frequently approaches me following worship, always with the same introduction: "I have a question!"

Section III, Article E of the CC Ethical Guidelines, reads thus: *"We will grant our minister responsible freedom of the pulpit and the right to present Christian convictions without fear."*

That is what a pastor needs from her congregation.

Let's continue with Article F.

Let me tell you about Amelia: She was the Director of a Community Preschool sponsored by a congregation I once served. I was asked to resolve growing conflicts between the Director and the preschool teachers, and between the Director and the church. Two years of objective research revealed that the Director was an inept administrator, and untruthful. I recommended to the church leadership that the Director be dismissed. They resisted that recommendation, and the Director remained. Two

years after that, the parent Board of the preschool found its own reasons to release the Director. My friend the church secretary insisted that the church had failed to support what I had been asked to do.

Section iii, Article F of the CC Ethical Guidelines, reads thus: *“We will respect and cooperate with our minister’s spiritual and intellectual leadership.”*

That is what a pastor needs from her congregation.

Lastly, let’s continue with Article N.

Let me tell you about Steve: He was a credit, in many ways, to the clergy profession. He had lots of good ideas, he cared about people, and he put Jesus’s teachings into practice. But he sometimes manipulated things to get his way, he was not a good listener, he did not take well to other points of view, and he discouraged any thought of a formal evaluation of his ministry. For his entire sixteen years at a church I knew well, Steve would not allow the formation of a Pastoral Relations Committee.

Section III, Article N of the CC Ethical Guidelines, reads thus: *“We will have an active Pastoral Relations Committee...to continually monitor the relationship between our minister and the congregation, and we will call on the assistance of the regional staff before a conflict situation grows into a crisis.”*

That is what a pastor needs from her congregation.

She needs opportunities to pastor without outside interference; she needs feedback, praise, prayer, and participation; she needs freedom of the pulpit; she needs respect for her spiritual and intellectual leadership; and she needs the benefit of a Pastoral Relations Committee. More is spelled out in the CC Ethical Guidelines for Congregational Conduct, which I hope you will review and apply.

And she needs to be loved abundantly, of which her next congregation is abundantly capable.