

THE PASTOR EMERITUS/EMERITA

Introduction

You are no doubt reading this Parish Life and Leadership document because you have some interest in learning more about the role and function of the *pastor emeritus/a*. Your church governing board may be thinking about conferring this status. You may be someone who is being given this recognition. You may be a church lay leader or a pastor who is wrestling with a predicament that is taking place because of confusions about roles and responsibilities related to *pastor emeritus/a*.

The term “*Pastor Emeritus*” (male) or *Pastor Emerita* (female) is used by a local church of the United Church of Christ to honor a person whose lengthy ministry in that local church has been one of distinguished service. The designation recognizes an individual’s retirement from that particular local church and from active ordained ministry. Conferring this status is an act of a local church and is an honor that the church may wish to consider following the pastor’s departure.

Before Conferring

It is important to know what the title means. The word “*Emeritus/a*” has to do with being retired from active service while retaining one’s title as an honor. The retaining of title is offered because of merit earned during the time of active service. The honor is never an automatic one but rather is a recognition of exceptional service.

When someone is a *pastor emeritus or a pastor emerita*, that person and the local church need to be aware of several important facts.

First, the person is receiving this very special honor because of the merit of service rendered. The previous ministry distinguished itself over a long period of time, usually a minimum of ten years. Both the person honored and the local church need to have a sense of the specifics of the exceptional service that warrants the awarding of this honor.

Second, the person and the local church need to know that the person so honored has retired from active ministry and is no longer the pastor of that local church. This is a very tender point that must be made absolutely clear. When someone has served a local church with distinction over a long period of time, it can be difficult for both the person and the local church to sever functional ties. When ignored or resisted, painful moments of confusion and resentment can surface and consequently undercut cherished memories and on-going relationships. It is for these reasons that PLL suggests that this honor not be considered until the pastor has been retired for a considerable period of time, preferably after the interim period has been completed and a new pastor has begun her/his ministry.

Third, it is very helpful for a local church to have written guidelines regarding the title *pastor emeritus/a*. The guidelines will not outline “roles and functions” because the title is an honorary one rather than a functional one. Rather, the guidelines will reflect on responsibilities of both the *pastor emeritus/a* and the church members. Clarity is essential before the recognition is conferred in order to avoid unnecessary awkwardness.

The following are suggestive of responsibilities involved in this honorary title:

1. The *pastor emeritus/a* and members are to hold in regard the health and vitality of the pastoral office and to do that by treating the present pastor (interim pastor or called pastor) as the pastor of that local church.
2. The local church may wish to include the name of the *pastor emeritus/a* on church stationary, the church web site, and other settings where such listing is appropriate.
3. The local church may wish to invite the retired pastor to play a specific role in particular church celebrations (such as anniversaries.)
4. The local church will seek to inquire about and be concerned for the ongoing health and happiness of the *pastor emeritus/a* and will maintain contact to ensure ongoing concern and support.

A Suggested Process for this Designation

The initiative for conferring this honor customarily begins with the church governing board. They should draw up a formal resolution outlining the specific highlights of the retired pastor's ministry; it will also be important to include in the text of the resolution a description of the pastor's distinctive qualities that members continue to hold in high regard. The resolution is then presented to a meeting of the congregation for their approval. Following that action, a date is set for the presentation.

Conferring the Recognition

Conferring takes place within the worship life of that local church. There will likely be other celebrative activities, but the actual conferring is a ritual act.

At some point in the worship service, it is appropriate for an officer of the local church to call upon the person to hear words to the following effect:

“Recognizing your pastoral leadership of this congregation since the year____, we bestow upon you the honor of being known to us and to others as Pastor Emeritus (or Pastor Emerita) of this congregation.”

“We remember with regard . . . (and here specifics are named).”
“In conferring this honor, we join with you in a continued appreciation for the pastoral office. And though you will no longer actively serve as pastor, your . . . (name some qualities) . . . help us to regard you and the pastoral office you held in our midst.

“In conferring this honor, we pledge ourselves to continued concern for your health and happiness. We will hold you in our prayers and cherish the contributions you have made.”

It is customary--and particularly meaningful—for who represent the United Church of Christ as a denomination to be invited to participate in the conferring of this honor.

A certificate related to *pastor emeritus/a* can be secured from Parish Life and Leadership. This certificate may be given to the person as a part of the act of conferring. The Conference/Association registrar should be notified that the church has taken this action.

Maintaining the Honor Conferred

The present pastor, the *pastor emeritus/a*, and members have a role to play in maintaining the honor conferred.

The present pastor can initiate active participation of the *pastor emeritus/a* at special celebrations in the life of the church.

The *pastor emeritus/a* can firmly refer well-intended invitations for pastoral service to the present pastor.

The local church and its members can be helpful by staying in touch and actively caring for the *pastor emeritus/a*. They can also remain aware of potential difficulties and actively avoid inappropriate pressures to involve the former pastor in the regular duties of the present pastor.