**Some Reflections for Pastors Nearing Retirement  
by the Rev. Jan Hoffman**

My husband, Craig, and I served as pastors of the First Reformed Church of Scotia for over 21 years. The congregation knew our ages, that in 2015 we were turning 67 and 65, and they expected our retirement sooner rather than later. But the congregation didn’t know when. You will probably know for yourself 6 to 12 months before your congregation knows.

Several factors led to our announcement in January for an end-of-June retirement: our own personal finances and well-being, the church’s health and well-being, how long between the announcement and our actual leaving, and the Church Year. When we’d decided on a couple of possibilities, we spent time as a Consistory discussing the best time. The amount of time between the announcement and our final Sunday was the right amount of time for our particular situation.

Consistory leaders were aware about three years before our retirement that we’d be leaving sometime in the near future. So, even without announcing a firm date, together we were able to plan ahead — making sure that elders were up to snuff, planning with the consistory nominating committee to make sure that respected leaders were either on or ready to come on the consistory, and that strong leadership would be available for the search committee, too.

For my personal journey and health, in the year before retiring, I got a coach, a retired RCA minister I knew and trusted, who was tremendously helpful. I also saw a spiritual director monthly. She kept me focused and grounded. The following are practices that I found helpful in the months between our announcement and our retirement.

**Stay focused on the present**, don’t worry about 4 months from now. Keep the congregation assured that we move into the future with God.

**Nothing will separate them, or us, from the love of God in Christ Jesus.**

**Develop a care team** to follow through with the sick, shut-ins, and those who need watching after you leave, making sure that no one falls through the cracks when there is no longer an installed pastor. The sick and elderly wanted reassurance about their future without us. It took a lot of planning and organizing to create the care team. We met regularly as Stephen ministers, health and wellness team, church administrator, care team heads (an elder and deacon), caregiver coordinator, visitors’ coordinator and pastors. This group met even during the last week before our retirement to go over final details and needs. It helped us to feel good about handing off the care of the congregation.

**Let people know pastoral care will continue** with Stephen ministers, elders, and with others who will call and offer care.

Continue to develop the value of welcoming and **offering hospitality.**

**Encourage staff**, take time for the people stuff.

No drama. Be the adult. Stay focused on the present. People will want your attention. Take care of yourself and begin to say goodbye right away.

**Use hopeful images and scripture which assure the congregation and staff, but remind them of the reality of change** and that we will say farewell to one another.  I used Abram and Sarai figures from Children and Worship, and the images of Simeon and Anna blessing the Child at the end of their lives. Make this time a blessing into the future. God is with us wherever we go.

**Bless the children and the elderly**. I think the last year is to be one of blessing, remembering as we move into the future with hope and gratitude.

No drama. Be gracious. Reassure, but walk away from hand-wringing.

**Give thanks**, publicly and privately.

Say goodbye to small groups, meet with groups intentionally to say goodbye and move forward, providing reassurance and new leaders or people responsible if possible.

It’s ok for the congregation to see us cry, **but don’t get maudlin**. It’s good for them to see us joyful, laughing as we move toward retirement and fun!

**Boundaries.**  Don’t make a fuss over one group more than another.  No promises about who will be on the search committee.  No promises that you’ll see them again or be in touch by email. Plan to make a clean break. We got out of town and left for a vacation immediately after our last worship service.   We were able to have family with us the last Sunday and we all went to VT for celebration. Craig and I were gone for two weeks which was the right amount of time for us to be gone from our home, where we continue to live.

We didn’t say goodbye to the children of the church until the last Sunday.  Their sense of time is different from ours. They can’t look ahead very far.  I was reminded again that today is all we have, and that today is all that matters.

**Love the staff.**  They’re working their butts off through this and when we’re gone, they’ll have incredible work to do.

Encourage one another publicly.  Give thanks publicly.

Go through your books, papers and electronic files NOW.  Begin to clean out your desk, office and computer when you announce, and well before your last Sunday. We found that a lot of people dropped in during the last two weeks and that there was less time to pack than we thought. Emails about last-minute details, etc. filled hours. We found it very emotional to throw files and purge books, very hard to let go. Weed out regularly. It helped people to see pictures off the wall, fewer books on my office shelves.

When we announced about 6 months before our retirement, some issues that had been kept in check, but were smoldering, broke forth. Some people needed more attention, I think, in the unsureness of it all, as they realized that people who held certain things together would be changing or leaving – the system was going to change.

We didn’t have enough time to call on all the people we’d wanted to see. Start early.

Expect to have to learn to let go of a lot of things, a lot of people, a lot of memories. Bless and release.

Expect this to be one of the hardest thing you’ve ever done, — good, but hard.