

SEPARATION ETHICS

GUIDELINES FOR THE RELATIONSHIP OF FORMER PASTORS AND CONGREGATIONS in the Presbytery of New Covenant

Toward just, smooth, and healthy transitions as pastors leave congregations.

Few circumstances in their professional lives challenge pastors to exercise more wisdom and judgment than the ones raised when leaving a congregation. Somewhat ironically, the most difficult transitions are often those involving congregations in which the pastor has been warmly loved and appreciated. In addition to making a professional move, the pastor and her/his family are leaving supportive friends and community. When the transition involves the retirement of a pastor who elects to remain in the community, and perhaps even in the community of the church, the issues become even more complex and challenging.

The Book of Order offers brief, but important guidance in the matter of transitions: **(G-14.0606) “Former pastors, associate pastors, and assistant pastors may officiate at services for members of a particular church, or at services within its properties, only upon invitation from the moderator of the session or in case of the inability to contact the moderator, from the clerk of session”**. These guidelines refer to any former ministerial relationship with a congregation as defined in G-14.0500 (i.e., pastor, associate pastor, designated pastor, co-pastor, interim pastor, stated supply pastor, temporary supply pastor, parish associate, organizing pastor, etc.)

While such transitions involve a number of entities (i.e. sessions, congregations, etc.), the Committee on Ministry (COM) believes that the burden of responsibility for creating a healthy transition lies primarily with the professional behavior of the pastor who is leaving. Pastors must view the process of separation and transition as perhaps a final, but critical part of their ministry to the congregation they have served. Not to do so undermines the future health of the church and is a violation of professional ethics. Considering the time, energy, and emotions a pastor gives a church, it is reasonable that he or she would give due attention to passing the baton well to the next pastor.

Practically, the exiting pastor must work to educate the session and congregation on the Presbyterian understanding of the transition. She/he ought to take great care in expressing her/his support of the process and the role that Presbytery plays in it. Emotionally and spiritually, the exiting pastor can play a positive role in the welcome the interim or installed pastor will receive. Explaining the transition process and the reasons for it will also assist the exiting pastor in drawing and maintaining proper boundaries. Not unimportantly, the former pastor who works to make a good and positive transition also leaves the congregation with a final and selfless example of the love and care of the Good Shepherd for the beloved flock.

The following are brief guidelines based on the Book of Order, and growing out of the experience of the COM. Representatives of COM shall review this policy statement with each minister who is leaving/retiring from a congregation in the Presbytery of New Covenant. The information below will also be presented to the Session of the congregation effected by the move (prior to the election of a PNC) as a part of the

transition meeting conducted by a representative of COM. In addition, a pastoral letter regarding these guidelines shall be shared with the congregation. (A sample letter is attached).

Departing pastors will be asked to sign and submit to the Committee on Ministry, the attached "Declaration of Intent," attested by the Clerk of Session for the church.

Guidelines

- A.** When Presbytery dissolves the pastoral relationship, that relationship is ended. Only the pastor duly installed by Presbytery, or the pastor approved by the Presbytery for temporary service, is authorized to perform pastoral duties among a particular congregation.
- B.** The former pastor shall not participate in any funerals, weddings, etc., of her/his former parish, unless invited by Session. Also, there shall be no visitation or contact which could be interpreted in any way as pastoral. This will be difficult, but if the first invitation is accepted, there will be no reason to refuse other requests.
- C.** The only exceptions to "B" are those mentioned in the Book of Order, G-14.0606. Certainly during the first year, it is advisable to refrain from all pastoral contact.
- D.** In the case of a pastor who retires in the same community as her/his former church, COM strongly recommends that the former pastor and family become active in the work and worship of another congregation. Remaining in the same congregation can lead to tensions and difficulties which no one intends, but nevertheless cannot be avoided.
- E.** Simple sensitivity and courtesy ought to rule. Pastors who violate the guidelines and return to a previous congregation are showing disregard for the minister or interim in place there. The congregation or individual members who insist on inviting a previous pastor to perform duties undermine the success of the pastor currently serving them.
- F.** The former pastor shall vacate both the manse and the office by the date of termination or some immediate predetermined date. At the time of vacating, all keys should be returned to the Session or proper church committee. Further, definite plans should be made by the former pastor for the disposition of pastoral counseling notes, personal records, etc.
- G.** Concerns or complaints regarding any of these issues shall be directed to the COM resolution. In the event that a satisfactory resolution is not achieved, the matter will be forwarded to the Stated Clerk of Presbytery.
- H.** Upon receiving the unresolved complaint, the Stated Clerk shall invite the Moderator of COM and two other COM members to meet with the person alleged to have violated the privilege of the pastoral relationship. Should they

find the complaints valid, and should the practice continue, the matter may be brought before the entire COM. The former pastor may be subject to censure according to the "Rules of Discipline."

- I. Former pastors who are elected pastor emeritus are reminded that this is an honorary title only and carries no job responsibilities or privileges unless they are expressly stated by the Session and approved by the Presbytery. (Book of Order G-14.0605).
- H. Former pastors are still under the obligation of the Presbytery's Sexual Misconduct Guidelines.
- I. Subject to the needs and desires of the former pastor and his/her family, the Presbytery has the responsibility to meet the spiritual and physical needs of his family and to utilize their talents and gifts to the glory of God.

May, 2006

A sample letter to be sent by a pastor leaving a congregation

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I am writing this with all the mixed emotions that necessarily are a part of saying good-bye to folks who have been important in my life. Soon I will no longer be your pastor as I [begin my retirement/take up that task in another place]. I leave confident that God will continue to care for and meet all your needs. An interim pastor will soon be present to serve as your pastor and "prepare the way" for an installed pastor to arrive and lead you into a new chapter of your life as _____(name of church)_____.

Leaving a congregation that has become dear is not easy. I know that in the days to come, I will continue to "feel" like your pastor. There is something of grieving in this. It will be tempting to try to keep up with the life of _____ Church — the community of faith of which my own life has been so much a part. I suspect that some of that same thing might be true on your part as well — that it may take some time before someone else becomes your "pastor".

We can serve each other in this. Our presbytery has had a good deal of experience in this business of "saying good-bye" to a pastor. Guidelines have been developed that provide clear boundaries. These guidelines will help us all to bring honor to all that we have been to each other as well as all that we have achieved together, and will bring a healthy closure to our shared ministry. Fundamental to these guidelines is the simple reminder that when a pastor leaves a congregation, it marks the end of the pastoral relationship. It does not mark the end of love and care for each other, but of necessity, the end of our former relationship. Toward this end, after _____(date of departure)_____, I will not involve or insert myself in any part of the life of _____ Church. For the sake of the next pastor's success, it would be inappropriate for me to continue as a theological guide, as an officiant for weddings or funerals, or as your pastoral presence in times of crisis such as hospitalization. As one who poured energy, time, and emotions into the health of this congregation, I want the church to prosper. Consequently, you will find no greater advocate than me of your next pastor. Please do not cause me to choose between my love for you and the success of your next pastor by asking me to perform pastoral duties that rightly rest with him/her.

I know this may not be easy to accept. Please trust that experience has taught that when a pastorate is ended, the responsibility of leadership and care must end as well. For the sake of the pastor leaving a field, but even more, for the sake of the church,, an ethic of separation needs to be honored by all. I hope you welcome your interim pastor and the next installed pastor with the same warmth and love that enveloped me when I arrived as a stranger among you. I will try to honor you by focusing my energy on that which God has determined for my future, and will joyfully, in whatever I do, share all that you have taught me about being a pastor.

Sincerely,

**DECLARATION OF INTENT
(Separation Ethics – Presbytery of New Covenant)**

I, _____, will be leaving/retiring from my current pastorate at _____ on _____.

- I have read, understood, and agree to abide by Separation Ethics, “Guidelines for the Relationship of Former Pastors and Congregations.”
- If, at any time, it appears that I am in violation of this agreement, I understand that the Committee on Ministry will counsel with me. If, at any time, it appears that members of my former congregation are in violation of the “Guidelines,” I will seek counsel with the Committee on Ministry.
- Persistent violation of the “Guidelines” by any party may result in disciplinary action, according to the Book of Order, “Rules of Discipline.”

Signed

Date

Attested by: _____
Clerk of Session, (name of church) or COM Chair