

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-2.0905) "After the dissolution of the pastoral relationship, former pastors and associate pastors shall not provide their pastoral services to members of their former congregations without the invitation of the moderator of session."** These guidelines refer to any former ministerial/pastoral relationship with a congregation (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 facilitating a successful transition for the next pastor.

Practically, the exiting pastor must work to educate the session and congregation on the Presbyterian understanding of the transition. The exiting pastor ought to take great care in expressing support for the process and the role that the 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 shared experience of the COM. Representatives of COM shall review this policy statement with each *teaching elder* (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 affected by the move prior to the election of a Pastor Nominating Committee (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 the presbytery dissolves the pastoral relationship, that relationship is ended. Only the pastor duly installed by the 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 the former parish, unless invited by the moderator of 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.** 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 for resolution. In the event that a satisfactory resolution is not achieved, the matter will be forwarded to the stated clerk of the 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 emeriti 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.
- J.** Former pastors are still under the obligation of the presbytery's Sexual Misconduct Policy.
- K.** Subject to the needs and desires of the former pastor and 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 for 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,

SEPARATION ETHICS

10 Guidelines For Church Members When a Pastoral Relationship Ends

1. When the pastoral relationship between a minister and a congregation is dissolved by reason of retirement, a call to other service, or any other cause, the minister's relationship with members of the congregation is altered in ways that must be respected by all persons involved. The relationship that formerly existed between the minister as pastor and members of the congregation is no longer appropriate. The minister may continue to be a friend, and will continue to be a sister/brother in Christ. However, this minister is no longer the pastor.
2. Efforts by a member of the congregation to continue the past relationship (such as asking the former pastor to perform some usual or customary pastoral services) creates an ethically awkward situation. While the former pastor may wish to honor the request (and certainly would not want to hurt feelings), ministerial etiquette and separation ethics make it inappropriate to render such services.
3. Effort should be made to schedule weddings, funerals, hospital calls, etc. so the current pastor, whether interim or installed, can provide the required pastoral services. If your church is without any pastoral leadership, the Presbytery can be of assistance in helping secure the services of someone to assist for specific occasions.
4. Although the former pastor is likely still to be interested in the health of the congregation, it is imperative that members avoid discussing the congregation, the new pastor, the Session or any other aspect of congregation life with the former pastor. Such discussions are likely to be perceived as soliciting the former pastor's advice or counsel on church matters. It is in her/his best interest and for the health of the church that the former pastor distance herself/himself from the congregation. Raising issues related to the congregation with the former pastor makes this more difficult and frequently puts her/him in an awkward ethical situation.
5. It is inappropriate to take comments, concerns, or criticisms of the current pastor to a former pastor. Attempts should be made to resolve such issues directly with the current pastor. If that fails, present the issues to the Session or Personnel Committee, if applicable. Should this prove unsatisfactory, further recourse is available through the Presbytery's Committee on Ministry. Any effort to involve a former pastor in any issue between members and the current pastor will only confuse the situation and make matters worse. It will also put the former pastor in an untenable ethical situation.

6. As quickly as possible, re-define relationships with the former pastor. A friendship based on common interests and personal compatibility is entirely appropriate. Such relationships with a former pastor may and should be continued as long as care is taken to avoid slipping into a pastor-parishioner relationship. Continue to be a colleague in ministry with the former pastor through the Presbytery, ecumenical, or community organizations. There may be other aspects of the relationship with a former pastor that will continue after termination of the pastor-parishioner relationship.
7. If the former pastor is leaving the community, say good-byes and express affection and esteem in appropriate ways before she/he leaves the service of the congregation. This will help avoid continuing the relationship in inappropriate ways after the pastor has left the congregation.
8. Seek out the new pastor for pastoral care and support. During the transition from a former pastor to a new pastor, the task of the members of the congregation is to make the change to new leadership. Anything which aids this adjustment will contribute to the health of the congregation.
9. Work on developing an appropriate relationship with the new pastor. Talk about concerns and expectations for the congregation. Share expectations, hopes and dreams for the pastoral relationship she/he will develop with each member.
10. **Finally, pray on a regular basis for both the current and former pastors, and for the congregation!**

(Adopted by Committee on Ministry October 7, 1997, slightly revised, May, 2006)

Bruce Reyes Chow- blogpost on saying goodbye and social media

Today is my final day as the pastor of Mission Bay Community Church and this post will be the last time, for a while, that I'll focus on my pastoral life there. It has been a splendid 11+ years, our good-byes were healthy and, after a few last administrative hand-offs, it will be time for us to move onto the next stage of our ministry. For those who have gone through this process before, you know that it can be a difficult one for all involved and that there are no hard and fast rules about how approach the transition in this day and age of social media.

First a little context setting. As a Presbyterian Church (USA) congregation MBCC will work with the local governing called a "presbytery" to move through a process of seeking and calling a new pastor. This usually means having an interim pastor, doing some kind of search and then calling someone as their new pastor. As for me, since I am not headed to a new church AND I am staying in the area, I will become what is called a "member-at-large" and will affiliate with a congregation as a Parish Associate. This is usually not a paid position, but one that allows a minister to support the pastor of a congregation and is usually held by folks engaged in other areas of ministry that are not congregational in nature.

Throughout the entire process, we strongly encourage the departing pastor and the congregation to extricate themselves from each other's lives in order to allow room for new pastoral leadership to take hold. In a case such as mine where I was the founding pastor, it is even more important that I do not inadvertently influence the life of the church as they go through a pastoral search for the first time and seek to discern God's hopes for their future. And while it seems severe and harsh, this means being very clear about boundaries of interaction after I am no longer the pastor.

Creating these boundaries are often difficult to maintain, especially when the pastor stays in the area. Most of us have heard of many a pastors have an unhealthy influence on a congregation after their time as pastor is done. With the best of intentions and love, many pastors who can't let go can end up doing harm to the very community that are trying to help. Usually geography helps to build separation, but in this day and age of social media, geography no longer can be assumed to be a determining factor in creating healthy space between the pastor and the congregation.

In the case of Mission Bay Community Church, social media was not seen as a strategic use of technology, but a way of life. Via texting, email, Twitter and Facebook we cared for one another, shared news and enhanced the nature of how we were church together. It would be one thing to acknowledge that we will bump into each other at the local cafe or farmers' market, but when there are hundreds of

updates showing up in Twitter and Facebook streams, there is an added layer of intentionality that must be addressed when a pastor leaves.

As we talked about interaction after I was done being their pastor, we went from being painfully rigid, trying to think of every possible interaction that might happen to being overly general and just trusting that folks would figure it out. As I worked this out from my perspective thinking through what I believe would create difficulties it became clear that I hit the, "It's going to be really hard to create division" trifecta: I'm not leaving the city, I'm all up in the social media and I'm not moving to serve another congregation.

In the end we came up with a "covenant" for our future rather than a list of dos and don'ts. While the elements may feel somewhat harsh, I feel it is necessary, especially as the founding pastor, to highlight the importance of creating separation if they are to be most open to where God may be leading. I don't think that anyone feels that I no longer care about their individual and communal joys and struggles in life, but we need to be clear that it is no longer my place to offer pastoral care, input on congregational life and/or commentary on pastoral leadership.

Here is the Covenant for Our Future that was received by the congregation on May 8, 2011 when we officially dissolved the pastoral relationship between myself and Mission Bay Community Church. Feel free to "liberate" and or all of it for your use.

A Covenant for Our Future

understandings about the future relationship between
Mission Bay Community Church and Bruce, R., E., A. and A.

The intention of this covenant is to act as a reminder of the importance of the relationship between pastor and congregation. To ensure a healthy transition from the current called pastor to an interim pastor and then to a new permanent pastor all must exercise great self-restraint in order to allow time for all to reflect on past ministry, dream about future ministries and allow for a relationship with future pastors to flourish.

We also acknowledge that there are complexities which can and will influence the nature of this particular pastoral transition: existing social networking relationships, the Reyes-Chow/Pugh Family remaining in the area, Bruce not moving to pastor another congregation and his visibility and involvement in the public arena.

The following measures may seem harsh, even legalistic, but the intent is to be forthright in our commitment to create space for all involved to grieve, reflect and dream.

With a posture of grace, understanding and trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit . . .

We all covenant to . . .

- Hold one another in prayer.
- Refrain from all intentional interaction online or in person until at least one year after the installation of a new called pastor including online commenting, texting, phone calls, etc.
- Treat online interaction with great care understanding that some people may need to "unfriend" on Facebook, "unfollow" on Twitter and/or find ways to remove undue social media visibility.

The Members and Friends of Mission Bay Community Church covenant to . . .

- Pray for the emotional and spiritual well-being of Bruce, R., E., A. and A. as they discern God's calling on their spiritual and church lives.
- No longer approach Bruce or his family regarding issues of pastoral care, congregational life or future pastoral leadership.
- Allow ourselves adequate time to honestly, fully and faithfully grieve the end of Bruce's time as pastor and the departure of his family from the life of the church.
- Welcome and embrace new pastoral leadership and joyfully engage in a process of discerning God's calling on our future.

Bruce, R., E., A. and A. covenant to . . .

- Pray for the emotional and spiritual well-being of Mission Bay Community Church, as individuals and as the gathered beloved community as they discern God's calling on their ministry.
- Allow ourselves time to grieve the end of a pastoral and congregational relationship.
- Seek out a new worshipping home and fully participate in the life of the larger church.
- Bear the primary responsibility for maintaining healthy boundaries, refraining from and discouraging any interactions regarding issues of pastoral care, congregational life or future pastoral leadership.

Obviously, as churches go through these social media enriched transitions, each person will need to decide how much he/she needs to be cut off from "exposure" to the activities of the departing pastor or

the congregation. For some this will require unfriending/hiding people on Facebook, unfollowing on Twitter and/or deleting contacts, but for most it will simply require extreme discipline to resist even the most innocent of interactions. We must not underestimate the power of the relationship between pastor and congregation and there must be time given for that relationship to lie fallow if a new form of relationship can ever be explored. This tension has always existed for random face-to-face interactions after a pastor leaves; social media has only heightened the frequency that these interactions might take place.

And for those that want some concrete advice, here are few things to be sure to do in terms of social media connections . . . or at least what I have done as the departing pastor. If you have any other good ideas or insights, please offer them here or on the [Facebook Status Update](#). It would also be great if you could share any litanies, prayers or other resources like this [Litany of Farewell](#) offered by [youravgpastor](#).

- Send a "final" email out to folks (at least elders and staff) so it is clear when you have begun this new phase. Email conversations can go on and on, so it is important to offer a mark of finality.
- Create an autoresponder for your church email list that directs folks to new church connections as well as a way for non-church contacts to remain connected. Send an email to bruce@missionbaycc.org to see the one placed on my church email.
- Remove yourself from internal communication lists, groups, docs, etc. on Google, Yahoo and other sharing platforms. With so many ways that people communicate, share docs, etc. it is important, for your own sanity, to not see conversations that you are no longer meant to be part of.
- Delete any groups or lists that you created that set aside congregation members in your news and updated streams.
- Have your administrative access removed from all congregational social media platforms. This might include having the church change passwords and other access points.

The "line" over which we must not cross when it comes to pastoral transitions is wide and gray thanks to the expansive nature of social media. I strongly believe that how pastors leave a congregation is just as important as how one arrives at the beginning of a call and serves during their time, so the more we can offer each other good models, perspectives and insights the better.

And a last thank you to any of the MBCC crew who may be reading this, it has been a privilege to be your pastor. Peace.

**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)