

PRESBYTERY OF THE TWIN CITIES AREA  
COMMITTEE ON MINISTRY

# **Guidelines on Separation Ethics: When Pastor and Congregation Say Goodbye**

Background and guidelines for pastors, sessions, and  
congregations concerning relationships and responsibilities upon  
the dissolution of the pastoral relationship.

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**Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area  
Separation Ethics Guidelines**

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## I. THE BACKGROUND TO THESE GUIDELINES

The Pastoral relationship is very important, often deeply personal, and, in some cases, life-saving to people in a congregation. This relationship evolves through study, teaching, preaching, administering the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, weddings, funerals, presence in crisis, and praying with and for members of the congregation. With the leadership of a congregation and particularly with the elders, the pastor works to encourage the people in the worship and service of God, equipping them for their tasks within the church and their mission in the world. In all of these dimensions of the pastoral relationship there are the elements of trust, confidence, admiration, affection, fondness, caring, and love.

The ending of the pastoral relationship is often a trying and traumatic experience for both the pastor and the members of a congregation. It always means change for the life of the pastor involved and the congregation. Therefore, in the light of our Book of Order and the best of our traditions, the following guidelines represent what the departing pastor and the congregation will want to do as they face the situation of pastor and congregation saying "Goodbye."

## II. THE GUIDELINES

### A. SAYING GOODBYE

The need to say goodbye to a congregation occurs for one of several reasons. A pastor may receive a call to another field of service. A pastor may retire. A pastor may decide to leave the pastoral ministry and enter another area of service. The presbytery may, for cause, take the initiative to dissolve the relationship. This break can be a difficult time for both the pastor and the congregation.

Whatever the cause, it becomes the occasion when pastor and congregation find they must say goodbye.

#### 1. Saying Goodbye to Accept a Call a Distance Away

When a pastor accepts a call to a ministry a distance from the congregation which she or he is leaving, the opportunity for contact with members of the former congregation is quite limited, often non-existent. However, there frequently arise certain circumstances which pose questions for the departing pastor as to what is appropriate and what can be most helpful to the congregation and the interim and following pastors. **It is always incumbent upon the departing pastor to make sure that parishioners know that her or his relationship with the congregation will come to an end. It is important that parishioners understand that this change of relationship is necessary in order that the congregation be free, in all respects, to make the adjustments necessary for changes of leadership, interim and permanent, without the departing pastor's influence.** (See Section B, "Responsibilities in Saying Goodbye," below.)

## 2. Saying Goodbye but Remaining a Neighbor

When a pastor says goodbye and remains nearby, there are particularly sensitive aspects of separation which require careful attention on the part of the departing pastor.

The experience of pastors and congregations over the years has led many to believe that when a pastor ends a ministry with a congregation, it is best for the pastor to move out of the community. However, this is not always possible or advisable. **Thus, it is particularly important when a departing pastor remains in the community and in proximity to the former congregation, that he or she, with care and forethought, pay particular attention to what is said below with reference to a departing pastor's responsibilities to the congregation, individual members of the congregation, and to the interim and subsequent installed pastors.** (See Section B below, "Responsibilities of Saying Goodbye.")

**The departing pastor should not be a part of the worshipping or fellowship life of the congregation except upon the initiative and invitation of the interim or installed pastor. If such an invitation is extended, normally, it should not occur until the interim or next installed pastor has had the opportunity to establish relationships with the congregation.**

A retiring pastor who remains in the proximity of the congregation from which he or she has retired, will need to give careful consideration to the responsibilities that follow below

## 3. When One is Elected Pastor Emeritus

When a pastor retires, the congregation may bestow upon him or her, the title of Pastor Emeritus.

To elect one as pastor or associate pastor emeritus is:

- ✦ evidence of a long and loving, mutually caring pastoral relationship;
- ✦ a congregation's way of saying to the church-at-large and to the world that they love this person and are thankful for his or her time with them; and,
- ✦ a gift to the retired pastor which says something special to him or her.

**However, the pastoral relationship has been dissolved. The relationship of pastor to the people has ended and there is no expectation of the person to be present with the congregation because of the election.**

**All expectations related to the former pastor of a congregation apply to a pastor emeritus.** (See below, “Responsibilities in Saying Goodbye.”)

## **B. RESPONSIBILITIES IN SAYING GOODBYE**

This paper speaks of “Separation Ethics.” The use of the term “ethics” implies certain values which are important to consider during this often highly charged experience of the dissolution of the pastoral relationship. Such values include:

- ✦ effective leadership;
- ✦ congregational health and stability;
- ✦ the growth of pastor and members in dealing with the pain, the problems and the possibilities of separation; and,
- ✦ the ability of the session and congregation to move positively and effectively toward the next phase of their life together.

These values instruct the conduct and responsibilities of both the pastor and the congregation regarding their separation.

The material which follows is addressed to pastor, session, and congregation as appropriate, and finally, the Committee on Ministry of the presbytery. **However, the pastor is the one in the professional leadership role and, therefore, the one who has responsibility for making sure that the separation that occurs is anticipated and carried through with foresight and effectiveness.**

### **1. Responsibilities of the Departing Pastor**

Because of the sensitivity of the pastoral relationship, it is important that the departing pastor, in **any** dissolution, assume certain responsibilities to the former congregations, to the remaining staff and personnel of the church, to individual members of that congregation, and to the interim and next installed pastors.

#### **a. To the Congregation**

When the date has been set for the dissolution of the pastoral relationship, the departing pastor must take the lead in beginning to prepare the congregation for their separation. Certain things will need to be communicated clearly to the congregation in order to avoid confusion on the part of members in the days ahead.

This communication can be accomplished in several ways. A letter could be addressed to the members of the congregation spelling out clearly the matters below which are part of the separation and the time that follows.<sup>1</sup> A sermon might contain references to the approaching separation and speak to these matters. In casual conversation one-on-one or in groups, in public presence, in newsletters, in all contacts with people of the congregation, it is important that these matters be communicated and every effort made to have them understood. These matters are:

- 1) that all pastoral and professional relationships and responsibilities of the pastor with the congregation will end as of the effective date of the dissolution;
- 2) that the pastor will not be involved in any way in the selection process of either the interim pastor or the next installed pastor. Neither will he or she be involved in any way with the selection of any search team or pastor nominating committee;
- 3) that the pastor, after leaving, will not become engaged in conversations with church members or staff which, in any way, offer opinions or criticism about the life of the congregation or the performance of the interim or any subsequent installed pastors.
- 4) that any desire on the part of members of the congregation for the departing pastor to participate in congregational life or services should be discussed not with the departing pastor, but with the interim pastor or subsequent installed pastors;
- 5) that the departing pastor may participate in a wedding, a funeral, or a baptism of the congregation after the date of dissolution, only by invitation of the interim pastor or installed pastor, who shall be the officiant.

**b. To Individual Members of the Congregation**

It is important that, with particular friends, it be made clear that the pastoral relationship will come to an end. This does not mean that friendships must come to an end. Friendships are priceless and are to be preserved, but there is a special responsibility on the part of the departing pastor to prevent friendships from

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<sup>1</sup> "Leaving the Pastorate: Staying in Town" by Rod Reinecke, in *Saying Goodbye, A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors*, an Alban Institute Publication by Edward A. White. Separation Ethics Guidelines, p. 6 of 9

becoming confused with the pastoral relationship. The pastoral functions of counseling, calling, conducting weddings, funerals, or baptisms are not appropriate. Neither is the rendering of opinions or judgments about the ministry of the former church or its pastor.<sup>2</sup> **It is the departing pastor's responsibility to see that this really happens.**

If the former pastor receives a request to return to the congregation for a particular occasion, it is important for her or him to remind those making the request that the present pastor is the one to whom the request should be made.

In any social context, where the former pastor is with friends or other members of the former congregation, it is the responsibility of the former pastor to be sure that he or she voices no criticism or evaluative comments about the new leadership of the congregation. It is not appropriate for the former pastor to comment on the "state of the congregation" or to be involved in any way in the selection of a successor, once she or he has departed.

**c. To the Remaining Staff and Personnel of the Church**

The former pastor has a responsibility to the remaining staff and personnel of the church at least in the following ways: 1) to prepare them for the separation that will occur; 2) to encourage them to receive and welcome the interim pastor and next installed pastor and be prepared to alter working patterns and relationships as may be needed; and, 3) to make clear that he or she will not be available for counsel or advice regarding the life and work of the church.

**d. To the Interim and Subsequent Installed Pastors**

The former pastor has a responsibility to the interim pastor and to subsequent installed pastors to make sure that any requests that come to him or her for services in the former congregation be redirected by the requesters to the interim pastor or installed pastor.

It is important that, when any request comes to the former pastor, she or he be in touch with the current pastor to let it be known what contacts have been made with him or her. This is a courtesy which is important to be extended to the current pastor. There should be no pastoral functions of any kind performed by the former pastor without the prior invitation or request of the current pastor.

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<sup>2</sup> "My Friend, the Former Pastor" by Joan Mabon, in *Saying Goodbye, A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors*, an Alban Institute Publication by Edward A. White.  
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Should any community non-church function call the former pastor back into the community for public appearance of whatever nature, as a courtesy, the former pastor should inform the current pastor of the fact and the nature of the occasion.

## **2. Responsibilities of the Session**

### **a. To the Departing Pastor**

Following the pastor's decision to request dissolution of the pastoral relationship, the session can give support and encouragement to the pastor in the implementation of the decision. This can be done by assisting the pastor in interpreting the meaning of the end of the pastoral relationship to the congregation and, if need be, to the wider community.

As a caring expression of closure, it is appropriate for the session to arrange for an occasion when the congregation and pastor may formally say goodbye.

### **b. To the Congregation**

The session will want to be sensitive to the feeling of loss experienced by members of the congregation while demonstrating through their actions the meaning of the end of the pastoral relationship

Additional session leadership may be needed in the transition period so that worship, congregational life, and fellowship may continue.

The session can help the members of the congregation by encouraging them to see this time as an opportunity for growth and change. It can be a time for listening to individuals and groups in the congregation. It can be a time for examining present life, ministry, and service, and to be open to new possibilities. It is important that the congregation be prepared for change and for new pastoral leadership.

With the help of the Committee on Ministry, the session should interpret the role of the Committee on Ministry of the presbytery during the transition period. This will involve the naming of a session moderator, the process of obtaining an interim pastor, and the process of calling an installed pastor.

## **3. Responsibilities of the Committee on Ministry**

### **a. To the Departing Pastor**

Upon learning of the pastor's intention to retire or resign, a representative of the Committee on Ministry shall meet with the pastor to discuss these guidelines.



**b. To the Session and Congregation**

Committee on Ministry representative(s) are available to be present at the meeting of the session when the pastor announces his or her resignation. The meeting shall include informing the session fully of these guidelines and orienting the session to the process of seeking pastoral leadership following the departure of the present pastor.

A representative of the Committee on Ministry shall be present at the meeting of the congregation when the pastor requests concurrence in her or his plans to leave, to inform the congregation of the process for obtaining subsequent pastoral leadership.

When a congregation plans to elect a retiring pastor as Pastor Emeritus, the material in II.A.3 on page 4, concerning the meaning of "Pastor Emeritus," will be sent to the congregation and a representative of the Committee on Ministry will be offered to interpret the statement if that is desired.

**c. To the Interim and Next Installed Pastor**

It will be important for the Committee on Ministry to review these guidelines with the interim pastor and the next installed pastor and to be available for counsel should any difficulties arise regarding relationships with the former pastor.

This paper has been prepared in the hope that it will provide guidance, support, and encouragement to pastors, sessions, and congregations in those situations in which a pastor and congregation discover that they must say goodbye.