

When a Pastor Leaves a Church

SEPARATION ETHICS

RATIONALE

The relationship between a pastor and congregation is often deeply personal, built on an accumulation of shared transitional and transformational times in personal and corporate lives. It has evolved through teaching, preaching, sacraments, weddings, funerals, presence in times of crisis, praying with and for members, counseling, and shared leadership. The pastor has encouraged people in worship, equipped them for tasks, helped bring forth gifts, and prepared them for mission. From these times, trust, confidence, admiration, affection, fondness, respect, and love have grown. When the relationship between a pastor and a congregation ends for any reason, it marks the beginning of a period of high emotions, uncertainty, and excitement for both the pastor and the congregation. In the months and years that follow, the congregation will evaluate its ministry and seek new leadership; this is a particularly important time in the life of the congregation and it requires appropriate distance from the past pastor so that the congregation can embrace its future. Likewise, that time is important for the former pastor to embrace a new stage in his or her life whether that is retirement, a new call, a new vocation, or a period of Sabbath from the practice of ministry. When congregations and former pastors do not keep appropriate distance from each other, it impedes the ability of both to accept the guidance of the Holy Spirit in this new stage of their lives.

Impact on the Former Pastor

When congregations turn to a former pastor to preside at weddings, funerals, and baptisms or to provide counseling and instruction, it prevents the pastor from enjoying the respite he or she sought in retirement or time away from the practice of ministry. When the former pastor has accepted a new call, it robs the present to serve the past by stealing the pastor away from his or her current ministry. When there is a new pastor called to the congregation, the return of the former pastor can degrade the collegial relationship that they share as presbyters. Furthermore, such requests can strain the good will between the former pastor and former congregation as he or she is forced to choose which requests to accept and which to decline.

Impact on the Current Pastor

Because the relationship between a pastor and congregation is built on the sharing of their lives and faith, when a congregation turns to a former pastor to provide those things which the current pastor is called to provide, it prevents that relationship from growing and sends the message that the current pastor is not really the pastor of the congregation. The involvement of the former pastor in the present life of the congregation can undermine the authority of the current pastor and degrade his or her relationship with the congregation.

Impact on the Congregation

In the period between pastors, the congregation has the opportunity to discover what God is calling it to be and do in the next chapter of its ministry. When a former pastor is involved in that process, either at the request of the congregation or by the former pastor's own initiative, he or she robs the congregation of the opportunity to move into that next stage of ministry. Once the congregation has called a new pastor, the first few years of that ministry are critically important because it is during that time that the relationship between the congregation and the pastor is established and the new direction of the congregation is set. The involvement of the former pastor during that time can prevent the relationship with the new pastor from being established,

which can end the tenure of that pastor before it begins. The involvement of the former pastor during that time can also prevent the church from setting a new direction in ministry either out of respect for the former pastor and his or her leadership or because the former pastor does not agree with the new direction; this can be detrimental to the congregation as it decides to minister to its community as it was and not as it is.

Polity

Recognizing the difficulty that a continuing relationship between a former pastor and a former congregation can cause, the Book of Order stipulates the following:

G-2.0905 - Officiate by Invitation Only

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.

Additionally, the 210th General Assembly approved the document *Standards for Ethical Conduct for Ordained Officers in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* which the Committee on Ministry commends to all deacons and elders (ruling or teaching) for study. A copy of that document can be obtained from the denomination's website (www.pcusa.org) or from the presbytery office. Items 14 through 17 of that document apply to the relationship between congregations, former pastors, and current pastors.

The "Standards of Ethical Conduct for Ordained Officers" in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

I will conduct my ministry so that nothing need be hidden from a governing body or colleagues in ministry. Therefore I will...

14. Deal honorably with the record of my predecessor and upon leaving a ministry or office speak and act in ways that support the ministry of my successor;
15. Participate in the life of a ministry setting I left or from which I have retired only as directed by presbytery;
16. Provide pastoral services for a congregation I previously served only as directed by the presbytery and provide pastoral services to members of other congregations only with the consent of their pastors; and
17. Consult with the committee on ministry in the presbytery of my residence regarding my involvement in any ministry setting during my retirement.

Finally, when a former pastor is interfering in the life and work of a former congregation and its current pastor, it is the responsibility of the presbytery to uprightly administer ecclesiastical discipline through the processes outlined in the Book of Order (G-2.0509) remembering that discipline is "for building up the body of Christ, not for destroying it, for redeeming, not for punishing" (D-1.0102).

Removal by the Presbytery

If a pastor is removed at the initiative of the presbytery because of renunciation of jurisdiction, disciplinary action, or for any other reason, that pastor shall not be invited to return without the approval of the Committee on Ministry (COM).

Pastors Emeritus & Parish Associates

The Book of Order no longer includes these titles commonly used to order the relationship between a retired pastor and a congregation. That does not mean that they are not allowed, just

that they are not defined by the constitution. In the case where a healthy relationship between the congregation, current pastor, and former pastor exists, these designations may be helpful in recognizing and ordering that relationship. For these purposes, the COM will understand these terms to mean:

Pastor Emeritus - a title given by the session to a pastor who retired from service to that particular congregation. By nature, pastors emeritus are retired and are not expected to perform any pastoral functions because of this honorary designation. Pastors Emeritus are expected to abide by the standards for ethical separation.

Parish Associate - a title given to a pastor who is retired, engaged in a validated ministry outside of the congregation, or a minister-at-large and who wishes to have a formal relationship with the congregation where he or she worships. Parish Associates serve at the invitation of the moderator of session and their relationship with the congregation is dissolved when a new moderator is appointed unless the new moderator extends a new invitation. Parish Associates are not installed and should be considered a temporary pastoral relationship and abide by the polity for such contained in G-2.0504b-c. Parish Associates may or may not be compensated depending on the nature of the relationship with the congregation as it is defined by the session and its moderator. Parish Associates are expected to abide by the standards for ethical separation.

When a session desires to name a pastor emeritus or a parish associate, they shall obtain the approval of the COM before proceeding.

STANDARDS FOR ETHICAL SEPARATION

The Committee on Ministry recognizes that each congregation and pastor are different and so some flexibility in separation is required in order to encourage the health of the presbytery and the congregations and teaching elders under its care. Therefore, the committee requires that separating pastors and congregations complete a *Boundaries Covenant* to order their lives after the call is dissolved. The *Boundaries Covenant* has some parts that are non-negotiable and some that will be negotiated by the session and the departing pastor and then sent to the Committee on Ministry for approval. The *Boundaries Covenant* will be kept on file at the presbytery office and will be given to any temporary or installed pastors who serve the congregation after that point for so long as it is relevant to the life and ministry of the congregation.

Non-Negotiable

No Relationship with the PNC - The former pastor shall not be involved in the call process for a new pastor in any way. This includes, but is not limited to, influencing the election of a PNC, commenting on the mission study, or making recommendations on particular candidates.

Compensation Ceases - The former pastor shall not continue to receive compensation from the congregation, whether salary, use of church property, or reimbursements except those negotiated as part of a severance agreement that has been approved by the COM.

Officiate by Invitation Only - The former pastor will only provide pastoral services to members of their former congregations as invited to do so by the current moderator of

session. The moderator of session may withdraw an invitation previously given by a past moderator or pre-arranged in the *Boundaries Covenant*.

Discourage Membership Transfers - If the former pastor has taken a new call near the former congregation, he or she will not attempt to recruit members from the former congregation and will encourage any who inquire about moving their membership from the former congregation to the new one to remain committed to their current congregation.

Negotiable

Period of Separation - It is customary for a former pastor to observe a period of no contact with the congregation for a period of time after the call is dissolved. Ordinarily, this period lasts until 1 year after a new pastor is installed.

Return for Pre-Arranged Services - Are there any impending services that will take place after the date of dissolution for which it has already been arranged for the pastor to preside? Is there someone else who can preside at these services instead?

Community Relations - A pastor is often seen as a pastor to people beyond the membership of the congregation. This may take on many forms whether it is presiding at weddings and funerals of non-members, participating in the leadership of local ministries, or providing counseling to members of the community at-large. To what extent were these activities because he or she was the pastor of the congregation and to what extent were they the personal projects of the pastor? Which of these activities will continue and which will end? Who needs to be told of these new boundaries (funeral directors, wedding planners, hospital chaplains, ministry boards, etc.) and how will they be informed?

Family - Are any of the pastor's family members also members of the congregation? Will they continue to be active in the life of the congregation? How will the congregation continue to provide support and care to them while also keeping appropriate distance from the former pastor? What considerations need to be made for and by the family as the congregation proceeds to call a new pastor?

Friendship - Just because the former pastor is no longer the pastor, does not mean that he or she does not have real and lasting friendships with members of the congregation. How will the line be drawn between being someone's pastor and being someone's friend?

Social Media - New forms of media have enabled new forms of ministry; they have also complicated separation ethics as pastors who have moved far away can more easily continue to provide pastoral services to members of their congregations using those means. To what extent have blogs, social media, text/instant messages, email and other electronic means been a part of the ministry of the pastor? What activities need to end? What needs to change to help the congregation turn away from their former pastor and towards their new one?

Severance - When a pastor leaves a congregation there are some final compensation issues to be negotiated including the use of accrued vacation time, the disposition of church property (laptop, books, cell phone, vestments, etc.), the use of a manse beyond the date of dissolution, etc. In the event that the dissolution of the call was not initiated by the pastor, the presbytery will often require an agreement that includes the continuation of compensation for a defined period of time while the pastor seeks a new call.

To Whom These Standards Apply

Pastors - All former pastors whether they are teaching elders who served in installed or temporary positions or are commissioned ruling elders are expected to abide by the *Boundaries Covenant* out of respect for their ordination vow to "be governed by our church's polity, and abide by its discipline... and be a friend among your colleagues in ministry" (W-4.0404).

Congregations - Congregations are expected to abide by the *Boundaries Covenant* out of respect for the former pastor, his or her new call (or retirement), and the new pastor of the congregation, and the promises that the congregation made regarding that new pastor "to respect his (her) decisions, and to follow as he (she) guides" (W-4.0404).

Presbytery - The Presbytery is expected to encourage all parties to live within the terms of the *Boundaries Covenant* as an extension of its responsibility for "disciplining its members who are teaching elders; commissioning ruling elders to limited pastoral service; [and] promoting the peace and harmony of congregations" (G-3.0301c).

While the COM does not require a *Boundaries Covenant* for persons serving congregations in other capacities, (youth ministry directors, Christian Educators, organists, etc), they commend it to congregations as a way to have a discussion about separation ethics when those individuals leave their employ.

Communicating These Standards to the Congregation

It is best if multiple parties explain the standards for ethical separation to the congregation so that it can be fully understood and does not appear to come from only one source. After the departure of the pastor is announced, the presbytery will meet with the session to talk about next steps and include separation ethics as part of that discussion. The session should share the contents of that discussion with the congregation. It is also particularly important for the departing pastor to speak about separation ethics with the congregation and to publically share the contents of the *Boundaries Covenant*.

On the pastor's last Sunday, the COM encourages the congregation to include a liturgical dismissal of the pastor that acknowledges his or her service to the congregation and the agreed upon separation ethics. Both the *Book of Occasional Services* and *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors* by Edward A. White include some resources for that purpose. A representative of the presbytery is often present on the pastor's last Sunday and will say a few words about separation ethics at that time; if a representative is unable to attend, a letter to the congregation will be sent instead.

Boundaries Covenant
Presbytery of the Pines

This covenant will order the future relationship between _____ (hereafter referred to as “the pastor”)
and _____
of _____ (hereafter referred to as “the church”)
who both understand and accept the terms of this covenant and commit themselves to abiding by
them as a way of encouraging the health and ministry of both the pastor and the congregation
when the pastoral relationship is dissolved as of _____.

As of the date above, the pastor and the congregation covenant together that

- The pastor will cease all pastoral duties and will only perform pastoral services to the congregation at the invitation of the moderator of session;
- The congregation will end compensation to the pastor except any negotiated severance;
- The pastor will not attempt to influence the search process for a new pastor;
- The pastor will not recruit members of the congregation to join him or her in his or her new call;
- Any future contact between the pastor and members of the congregation will be as friends and not as pastor & parishioner.

Period of Separation: _____

Return for Pre-Arranged Services: _____

Community Relations: _____

Family: _____

Social Media: _____

Severance: _____

This covenant is made for celebrating the shared ministry of the pastor and the congregation as it draws to a close and for strengthening their separate ministries as they go their separate ways. May Christ use it for the building up of his Church and may all glory be given the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever, Amen.

In signing, the parties indicate a commitment to abide by the above covenant and that they have received, understand, and will abide by the separation ethics policy of the Presbytery of the Pines.

Clerk of Session

Date

Pastor

Date

Moderator of COM

Date