

SEPARATION ETHICS: WHEN PASTOR AND CONGREGATION SAY GOODBYE

THE BACKGROUND TO THESE GUIDELINES

The pastoral relationship is very important, often deeply personal, and, in some cases, lifesaving to people in a congregation. This relationship evolves through study, teaching, preaching, celebrating the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, weddings, funerals, presence in crises, and praying with and for members of the congregation. With the leadership of a congregation and particularly 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 the pastor and the members of a congregation. It always means change for the life of the pastor 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."

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 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.

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, a transitional pastor, and succeeding 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".)

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/transitional pastor and subsequent installed pastors.** (Section B, "Responsibilities in Saying Goodbye.")

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

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 Commission on Ministry of the Presbytery. However, **the pastor is the one in the professional leadership role and; therefore, the one who has the 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 congregation, to the remaining staff and personnel of the church, to individual members of that congregation, and to the interim/transitional pastor 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 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. 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) All pastoral and professional relationships and responsibilities of the pastor with the congregation will end as of the effective date of the dissolution.
- 2) The pastor will not be involved in any way in the selection process of either the interim/transitional 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) 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/transitional pastor or any subsequent installed pastors.
- 4) 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/transitional pastor or subsequent installed pastor.
- 5) 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.

Note: This ethic prohibits a former pastor from saying, “Of course, I’ll officiate at your wedding (funeral, baptism, etc) if your pastor asks me.” It also prohibits

communication to the present pastor that “I’m going to be in town and plan to visit John/Jane Doe. I hope this is all right with you,” or any other similar verbal or written statement. Verbal or written statements such as these compromise the current pastor and make it difficult for her/him to say or do anything but agree to the involvement of the former pastor.

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 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 new pastor.

In the current age of social media, all on-line interaction must be handled with great care. This may require the departing pastor to “unfriend” on Facebook or “unfollow” on Twitter. He or she must exercise discipline in order to find ways to remove undue social media visibility.

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 in the following ways:

1. Prepare them for the separation that will occur.
2. Encourage them to receive and welcome the interim/transitional pastor and the next installed pastor and be prepared to alter working patterns and relationships as may be needed.
3. 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/Transitional Pastor and Subsequent Installed Pastors

The former pastor has a responsibility to the interim/transitional 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/transitional 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 that 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.

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.

When a congregation plans to elect a retiring pastor as Pastor Emeritus/Emerita, the congregation should contact Winnebago Presbytery and the Commission on Ministry for further guidance.

c. To the Interim and Next Installed Pastors

It will be important for the Commission 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 a congregation discover that they must say goodbye.

2. RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE COMMISSION ON MINISTRY

a. To the Departing Pastor

Upon learning of the pastor's intention to resign or retire, a COM representative shall provide a copy of the Separation Ethics Policy and accompanying guidelines and discuss implementation. An exit interview will be conducted by two COM representatives before, or at the time the pastor departs.

b. To the Session and Congregation

A COM representative shall be present at the meeting of the session when the pastor announces his or her resignation. The meeting will include orienting the session to the transition process and answering questions. These guidelines may be shared at that meeting.

A COM representative may be present at the congregational meeting when the pastor requests concurrence in his/her plans to leave.

Two COM representatives will conduct an exit interview with the session at the time of the pastor's departure. This policy and guidelines will be stressed in order to ensure a smooth transition moving forward.

c. To the Transitional/Interim and Next Installed Pastor

The Commission on Ministry shall be available for counsel should any difficulties arise regarding relationships with the former pastor.

RELEVANT BOOK OF ORDER REFERENCES

G-2.08

Revised 01-2004
Reviewed 08-2007
Revised 5/2013

Call and Installation

G-2.09

Dissolution of Pastoral Relationships