

Separation Ethics:
When Pastor and Congregation say Good-bye
(September, 2003)
(Revised August 20, 2009)
(Revised October 8, 2012)

Definition

A former pastor is one who no longer serves as pastor, associate pastor, co pastor, or in any temporary pastoral relationship in a congregation. A new pastor is one who currently serves as pastor, associate pastor, co-pastor, or in any temporary pastoral relationship in a congregation.

The Former Pastor

The former pastor, whether his/her residence is close or distant, must guard against perpetuating close ties with the former congregation. It is incumbent upon the former pastor to ascertain that parishioners know that her/his relationship with the congregation will come to an end. The former pastor should publicly announce that he/she will no longer be available for pastoral services following the stated date of termination. Thereafter, the former pastor shall fulfill that announced intention by declining all requests from members of the congregation for such services. In special situations, a former pastor may be called upon for services upon the invitation of the new pastor and the approval of the session. The former pastor would not ordinarily conduct services but rather would assist the new pastor at his/her direction.

If the former pastor maintains residence in the community, she/he should seek a church home in another parish. The former pastor should not be a part of the worshiping or fellowship life of the congregation except upon the initiative and invitation of the new pastor. If such an invitation is extended, it should not occur until the next installed pastor has had an opportunity to establish relationships within the congregation. When a church is without pastoral leadership (no installed or temporary pastor or Commissioned Ruling elder), a former pastor may perform pastoral duties (baptisms, weddings, funerals, or hospital visitations) only at the request of the session and with the concurrence of the COM Moderator. This relationship should immediately cease if it is in any way causing conflict within the body.

The former pastor should not be involved, in any way, in the selection process of the new pastor nor become engaged in conversations with church members or church staff which offer opinions or criticism about the life of the congregation or the performance of the new pastor. The former pastor should help prepare the remaining staff for the impending separation, encouraging them to receive and welcome the new pastor, and making clear that she/he will not be available for counsel or advise regarding the life and ministry of the congregation.

Former pastors who are elected pastor emeritus are reminded that this is an honorary title and carries no job responsibilities or privileges unless they are approved by the session. Former pastors are still under the obligation of the presbyteries (or denomination's) sexual misconduct guidelines.

The Session

The session can assist the former pastor in interpreting the meaning of the end of a pastoral relationship to the congregation. It is appropriate for the session to arrange for an occasion when the congregation and former pastor may formally say good-bye. The session will want to be sensitive to the feeling of loss experienced by members of the congregation while demonstrating through its actions the meaning of the end of the pastoral relationship. The session can help the members by encouraging them to see this as an opportunity for growth and change. This can be a time of listening to individuals and groups as well as a time for examining the present and future life and ministry of the church.

The session should grant the use of the sanctuary for baptisms, weddings or funerals in which the former pastor is to preside only at the invitation of the new pastor.

The session should refrain from being critical of their former pastor or of other church members to the new pastor.

Members of the Congregation

Members of the congregation should remember that no matter how much they are attached to their former pastor, that person is no longer their pastor. Any desire on the part of members to have the former pastor participate in congregational life or services should be discussed not with the former pastor, but with the new pastor. Members should not call on the former pastor for any pastoral services without first conferring with the new pastor. Any invitations to share in such services should be made by the new pastor.

This does not mean that friendships must come to an end. Members of the congregations and former pastors alike should realize that there is a difference between pastoral ties and personal friendships.

The New Pastor

The new pastor can do much to prevent difficulties arising because of the presence of the former pastor. The new pastor should remember that the ties that bind the members of a congregation to a former pastor have been forged through the unique experience of the pastorate. The new pastor should recognize that the congregation's affection for the former pastor as an individual does not prevent the development of bonds with the new pastor. Further, the new pastor should refrain from any criticism of the former pastor.

Conclusion

Because the pastoral relationship is very important, often deeply personal, and, in some cases, life-saving to people in the congregation, the dissolution of any pastoral relationship can become a highly charged emotional event. The separation ethics described above seek to promote;

1. Effective leadership
2. Congregational health and stability
3. The growth of both former and new pastors, along with members, in dealing with the pain, problems, and possibilities of separation
4. The ability of the session and congregation to move positively and effectively toward the future

Name of Church (printed or typed)

Former Pastor

Clerk of Session