

Guidelines for the Dissolution of the Relationship Between Pastor and Congregation in the Presbytery of Mid Kentucky

Revised July, 2008

[A revision of a previous paper titled: When Clergy Request Dissolution
of the Pastoral Relationships (June 15, 2000)]

The Committee on Ministry (COM) offers these Guidelines as an aid in the process of ending the relationship between pastor and congregation in a manner that conforms with Mid-Kentucky Presbytery's "Standards of Ethics" (sections H and L), so that both can go their separate ways without taking harmful unfinished business into the future. (*The term "pastor" includes all installed and temporary pastoral relationships. See G-14.0500ff, G-14.0510ff, G-14.0520ff, G-14.0550ff, and G-14.0560ff.*)

Through experience, the COM has observed that the temptations of avoidance and denial can be present at the time of dissolution and the consequences of failing to acknowledge unpleasant facts may cause difficulties for the next call of both pastor and congregation.

It is important, therefore, that you, the departing pastor, inform both the session and the congregation about the Presbyterian way of undertaking this transition and the supportive role the presbytery plays through the COM.

And it is important that you, the departing pastor, sign and submit to the COM a "Declaration of Intent," attested to by both the clerk of session and the COM liaison to the congregation (see Appendix I).

Pastoral relations are defined in the *Book of Order G-14.0500ff* and include those of pastor, associate pastor, co-pastor, etc. Temporary pastoral relations especially are defined in *G-14.0550-.0553* and include titles appropriate to ministerial tasks to which a pastor is called such as stated supply, organizing pastor, etc.

To aid in this transition, the COM liaison, or representative, to the congregation shall review these Guidelines with the session and you, the departing pastor. The first section, Part I, includes tasks that the pastor should do to bring about a satisfactory closure. The second section, Part II, deals with the ethical implications surrounding the dissolution.

Part I. Four Suggested Tasks for You, the Pastor

- A. Be intentional. Develop a plan of action with a timeline.
 - a. Become familiar with the *Book of Order G-14.0610-.0613*.
 - b. Contact the General Presbyter of the presbytery and the COM liaison to the congregation to inform them of your request that the presbytery dissolve your pastoral relationship.
 - c. Call a session meeting to inform the session of your intent and to request that it call a congregational meeting to act upon your request and make recommendations to the presbytery. Have a letter prepared to be sent immediately to the congregation informing them of your request and the session's action (see Appendix II for sample letter). Normally the time between your announcement and your departure should be not less than four

and no more than twelve weeks. Report the congregation's action to the COM.

- B. Be straight and clear about your reasons for leaving.
 - a. This needs to be done by an announcement to the session and a letter to the congregation (see A. c above).
 - b. Generally a pastor leaves because she or he has completed a call. Normally a congregation feels sad, forsaken, empty and lonely when a pastor leaves. It is prudent for you, the departing pastor, to give some reasons for leaving and also to convey that you will be all right. You might be leaving because you have completed the work of your call, you are responding to a new challenge, your family responsibilities necessitate a change, you have health concerns, etc.
 - c. Sometimes a pastor leaves because of a conflict in the congregation or because of anger at the congregation. If this is your situation, it is wise to consult first with a trusted friend outside the congregation to gain perspective on the appropriateness of what you should share with the congregation and how it should be stated. You should strive to preserve the peace and unity of the church and depart with all grace possible.
 - d. Be in touch with your feelings (sad, glad, scared, mad, etc.) and consider the best way to resolve them.
 - 1. If you are leaving with much affection and caring for the congregation, consider the best way to share these feelings:
 - (1) Are there persons to visit personally to say goodbye?
 - (2) Are there persons to phone?
 - (3) Are there persons to write a letter?
 - (4) Are there groups in the congregation to drop in on before leaving?
 - 2. If you are carrying disappointments, grudges, or resentments, consider how to work out these feelings. How you handle this part of the process could be a growth experience for you personally as you work with relationships that need healing. How you deal with these matters also will influence the health and well being of the congregation you have served. Consider how best to deal with these negative feelings:
 - (1) Would it be wise to work through these feelings with a colleague and let it go at that?
 - (2) Would it be wise to speak directly with those toward whom you harbor resentment?
 - (3) Would it be wise to take a trusted elder with you to such a talk?
- C. Get things in order.
 - a. Take care of pastoral business (fulfill preaching, pastoral, administrative and any other responsibilities; see that formal and informal records are in order.)
 - b. Take care of personal business (fulfill financial obligations; clean your office and manse.)
 - c. Inform church officers of tasks and pastoral situations that need to be covered.
 - d. Stay in contact with the COM.
- D. Express appreciation:

- a. to persons and leaders in the congregation who have assisted you in ministry, to other staff persons, etc.
- b. to other pastors, townspeople, presbytery staff, etc.

Part II Ethical Considerations in Ending the Pastoral Relationship with the Congregation

A. When considering the dissolution of the pastoral relationship, it is essential that the provisions in the *Book of Order G-14.0611-.0612* and the recommendations provided by the COM are known and followed by all parties. (See Appendix II and Appendix III)

To insure the peace and unity of the church, it is essential that all parties—presbytery, congregation and the minister—avoid escalating conflict by striving to achieve an equitable dissolution of the call.

You, the departing pastor, shall

- a. Announce publicly that upon leaving you will no longer be available to perform pastoral services including baptisms, weddings, home or hospital visitations or funerals, even if any were pre-arranged before you left; and that a new pastoral relationship needs to be established by the congregation with your successor. (*See G-14.0630 for the exception.*)

“Former pastors, associate pastors, and ministers who do not have a pastoral relationship with the particular church as defined in this chapter may officiate at services for members of the church, or at services within its properties, only upon invitation from the moderator of the session or, in case of the inability to contact the moderator, from the clerk of session.” G-14.0630.

To aid in emphasizing this to the congregation, Appendix III (“Guidelines for Church Members...”) is included in this document for you to duplicate and send to members of your congregation.

- b. Refer those making pastoral requests to the current moderator or clerk of the session. Former ministers shall not solicit such overtures. (G-14.0606).
- c. Recognize ongoing bonds of friendship, exercising care, to have no further ministerial influence on individual members by conversation, correspondence, comments, e-mails or other influencing actions.
- d. Exercise no part in the selection of a pastor nominating committee or the selection of a successor.
- e. Be especially discreet when, and if, visiting your former congregation. In such cases, it would be proper to pay your respects to your successor. Frequent visits to your former congregation should be avoided.
- f. Along with your immediate family, exercise all care so as to have no further influence on the congregation either by conversation, correspondence, e-mails or other action, privately or on the floor of presbytery.
- g. Seek to be supportive of the new pastor when comments are made about the program, policies and activities of the former congregation.

- h. Be open to the pastoral care offered by the presbytery in helping you meet your spiritual, physical, emotional and career assessment needs.

B. When ministerial relationships are dissolved through retirement, the following practices are recommended by COM:

- a. Upon retirement, you, the departing pastor, should ordinarily seek residence in some community other than that of the former congregation. You and your spouse, if you are married, shall not attend meetings or services of worship at your former congregation except by invitation of the moderator of session.
- b. If you remain in the community, you should take care in your participation in the life and work of a former congregation and avoid comment on the work of the pastor nominating committee and the work of any succeeding interim pastors or installed pastors.
- c. You should send clear and unambiguous signals that the word “retired” basically means “withdrawn from active service,” at least in that location. Naturally there will be misunderstandings about these matters, and there will be occasions when the line between old friend and parishioner will be muddled. In all such contexts of ambiguity, you bear primary responsibility for making clear that “retired” means “withdrawn from active service” in that location.
- d. In all community contacts, you shall make clear to the community that you speak for yourself and not as the pastor or official representative of a former congregation.
- e. The status of “Honorably Retired” or the title of “Pastor Emeritus, Emerita,” does not give you authority or the right to engage in ministerial activities or to exercise influence in former congregations except by specific invitation of the moderator of the session (*G-14.0620*).
- f. Be mindful at all times that you have the potential to be disproportionately influential in the life of any congregation that you become involved with. This potential influence carries with it a responsibility to be particularly sensitive to the effect your actions may have on the life of that congregation. Therefore, it is wise to avoid involvement in matters that could lead to controversy within the congregation.

(APPENDIX I)

**DECLARATION OF INTENT
UPON THE DISSOLUTION OF THE PASTORAL RELATIONSHIP
(PRESBYTERY OF MID-KENTUCKY)**

I, _____, will be leaving/retiring from my current pastorate at _____ on _____.

- I have read, understood, and agree to abide by “Guidelines for the Relationship of Former Pastors and Congregations in the Presbytery of Mid-Kentucky.”
- 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)

(APPENDIX II)

A Sample Letter Sent by a Pastor Leaving a Congregation

Date

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I am writing this with all the mixed emotions that are part of saying “Good-bye” to folks who have been important in my life and in the life of my family. Soon I will no longer be your pastor as I (e.g., begin my retirement/assume a call from another congregation). I leave confident that God will continue to care for and meet your needs. An interim (designated, supply, etc.) 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. It will be tempting to try to keep up with the life of _____ Presbyterian Church. Perhaps the same might be true of you as well and it may take some time before someone else becomes your “pastor.”

We can help each other in saying “Good-bye.” Our Presbytery has had a good deal of experience in this process. Ethical guidelines have been developed that provide clear boundaries for us. 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 caring 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 _____ Presbyterian 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.

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 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 that this may not be easy to accept. Please trust that experience has taught that when a pastorate is ended, the former pastor’s responsibility of leadership and care must end as well. For both our sakes, an ethic of separation such as I have outlined, needs to be honored by all. I hope you welcome your interim pastor and the next installed pastor with the same excitement, love and warmth 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.

In Christ,

(APPENDIX III)

Guidelines for Church Members When a Pastoral Relationship Ends

1. When the pastoral relationship between a pastor and a congregation is dissolved by reason of retirement, a call to other service, or any other cause, the pastor'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 pastor and members of the congregation is no longer appropriate. The pastor may continue to be a friend, and will continue to be a sister/brother in Christ; however, this pastor is no longer your pastor.
2. Efforts by a member of the congregation to continue a pastoral relationship with a former pastor create an ethically awkward situation. While the former pastor may wish to honor a request (and certainly would not want to hurt feelings), ministerial etiquette and separation ethics make it inappropriate to render such services.
3. Efforts 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 still interested in the health of the congregation, it is imperative that members avoid corresponding with, e-mailing or discussing the congregation, the new pastor, the session or any other aspect of congregational life with your former pastor. Such discussions are likely to be perceived as soliciting the former pastor's advice or counsel on church matters. It is in the former pastor's best interest and for the health of the church that the former pastor distance herself/himself from your congregation. Raising issues related to your 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 church's personnel committee, the session, and/or the presbytery's committee on ministry.
6. As quickly as possible, redefine relationships with the former pastor. A friendship based on common interests, community involvement and personal compatibility is entirely appropriate, as long as you avoid slipping into a pastor-parishioner relationship.
7. If the former pastor is leaving the community, say your good-byes and express affection and esteem in appropriate ways before he/she leaves the service of your congregation. This will help avoid continuing the relationship in inappropriate ways after the pastor has left your congregation and it will help maintain the health of the congregation.
8. Work on developing an appropriate relationship with the new pastor. Share concerns, hopes and expectations you have for the congregation and for the new pastor's role with the members.
9. Pray regularly for both current and former pastors and for the congregation.