

SEPARATION POLICY FOR DEPARTING/RETIRING TEACHING ELDERS THE PRESBYTERY OF ELIZABETH

“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.” G-2.0905

A pastor is called to serve a particular congregation through the voice of the congregation, confirmed by the presbytery. When pastors retire or are called to other positions, the pastor, the congregation and the presbytery appropriately enter into a new relationship. This policy will guide the relations between the former pastor and the congregation as they move through this time of transition.

When a pastor retires or leaves a congregation for another call, many different emotions flow through the life of the church. Hopefully, there are strong bonds of affection between the retiring/departing pastor and the congregation. Sometimes however, anger, frustration and sadness flow through many members. Whatever the mix of feelings and attitudes, the pastor’s professional relation to the congregation has come to an end. Relationships of friendship may continue but the pastoral role does not. The following guidelines will direct the process of separation.

1. Notification of Session:

a. The retiring pastor shall inform the session officially at least 3 months prior to the retirement date. The retiring pastor also should be in contact with the Transitional Leader, the Committee on Ministry and the Board of Pensions.

b. Departing pastors shall inform the session as soon as possible after their new call has been finalized.

2. The retiring/departing pastor should communicate with the entire congregation as soon as possible. That communication shall include this Separation policy, including its guidelines. Our common purpose is to seek clarity in relationships for the well being of the retiring/departing pastor and the church. “Let us love one another not in word alone, but in deed and in truth,” says the First Letter of John.

3. The retiring/departing pastor shall make every effort to be supportive of his/her successors, both the temporary pastor and the successor pastor. The retiring/departing pastor should refrain from reaching out to the successor pastor until first contacted by him/her.

4. The retiring/departing pastor shall refrain from any comment or conversation on the life of the church or the decisions/actions of the temporary pastor, installed pastor, or Session. Conversations on these issues with church members shall not occur. These guidelines extend to the use of social media, as well. Concerns should be referred to and handled by the temporary/successor pastor.

5. Any requests for retiring/departing pastors to officiate at weddings, funerals or baptisms must be directed to the temporary or installed pastor. Taking into account the wishes of the family and the well-being of the congregation, the temporary or successor pastor will determine what, if any, role the retiring/departing pastor will play. The retiring/departing pastor will defer to the judgment of the temporary/successor pastor.

6. If remaining in the community, the retiring/departing pastor should become an active participant in another congregation, so the successor pastor may establish her/his ministry apart from the presence and influence of the retiring/departing pastor. Although there is no rule that says the family of the retiring/departing pastor must give up its present church membership, the nature of the family's relationship with the congregation changes. For instance, there should be restraint in conversation about the church and the successor pastor's ministry. Family members who hold office in the church must be ready to be supportive and accepting of the new pastor. Family members who are employed staff members of the church should resign.

7. A retiring/departing pastor may not continue to live in a manse following a termination date without the permission of the congregation, Committee on Ministry and Trustees of Presbytery.

8. The Committee on Ministry's exit interview with the retiring/departing pastor offers a time for debriefing, for recounting highlights of the pastor's ministry and for clarifying the relationship the pastor will have with the congregation after he/she has left. The exit interview is not an evaluation. Rather, it is a time of sharing framed by remembrance that ministry of the church is grounded in Jesus Christ and not in a particular pastor.

9. The Committee on Ministry's exit interview with the Session is a time to discuss the separation policy and plan for how its guidelines will be shared with members of the congregation, who should be encouraged to release their dependency upon the departing/retiring pastor and move forward as guided by the Holy Spirit. They also must understand that they cannot contact the departing/retiring pastor for pastoral care, worship or discussing any church matters. The vows in a Farewell Liturgy will reinforce this.

10. The church may wish to plan one or more farewell events to express gratitude to the departing/retiring pastor and to celebrate the ministry they have shared together. It is appropriate to plan a Liturgy of Farewell during the final worship service with the congregation.

Both the pastor and the congregation have a responsibility to make sure that the church is free to act when the search process for a temporary/installed pastor begins. If a pastoral departure is handled well by both pastor and congregation, a range of emotions will be expressed, relationships will be celebrated, and the church will be free to discern its own future mission and ministry.

APPENDIX: SUGGESTED FAREWELL LITURGY

“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.” G-2.0905

LEADER: On date this church called name to serve as position.

DEPARTING PASTOR: I thank church name, its members and friends, for the love, kindness and support shown to me. As I leave I will carry with me all that I have learned here.

PEOPLE: We receive your gratitude and accept that you now leave to minister elsewhere. Your influence on our faith and faithfulness will not leave us at your departure.

VOWS OF RELEASE

LEADER: Do you, the members and friends of this congregation release pastor's name from the duties of this church and will you refrain from contacting name of pastor for pastoral care, worship or to discuss any church matters?

PEOPLE: We do and we will, with God's help.

LEADER: Do you offer your blessing for his/her ministry soon to begin name of church?

PEOPLE: We do, with God's help.

LEADER: Do you name of departing pastor release this church from depending upon you and will you agree to uphold the guidance of the separation policy?

DEPARTING PASTOR: I do and I will, with God's help.

LEADER: Do you offer your blessing for the continued ministry here and on the relationship with another who will come to serve?

DEPARTING PASTOR: I do, with God's help.

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MODERATOR OR REPRESENTATIVE OF PRESBYTERY: On behalf of the *Presbytery name*, I bear witness to the words spoken. The members of Presbytery hold each of you in prayer. We pledge our support in the transition signified in this service.

LEADER: Let us pray.

ALL: God, whose everlasting love for all is trustworthy, help each of us to trust the future which rests in your care. The time we shared in your name saw our laughter and tears, our hopes and disappointments. Guide us as we hold these memories but also move in new directions. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.

BENEDICTION: Go now, surrounded by our love and led by the promises of God, the presence of Jesus Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.