

**PRESBYTERY OF DETROIT
COMMITTEE ON MINISTRY**

**Policy Regarding Former Pastors:
Separation Ethics with Boundaries Covenant**

I. WHEN PASTOR AND CONGREGATION RELATIONSHIP IS DISSOLVED

A “Former Pastor” is one who no longer serves as pastor, associate pastor, interim, or in any temporary pastoral relationship (including Parish Associate) in a congregation once served, due to a call to other service, retirement, release from or termination from ordained office, involuntary termination, or the conclusion of a contract.

The Committee on Ministry has pastoral responsibility for all the minister members of the Presbytery. That responsibility needs to be exercised with special care during periods of transition for congregations when minister members depart or retire.

This document terms the process of pastoral transition “Separation Ethics.” Certain values are important to consider during the often highly emotional experience of the dissolution of a pastoral relationship. Such values include: effective leadership; congregational health and stability; the ability to deal with the pain, problems, and possibilities of separation; the ability of the Session, lay leaders, and congregation to move positively and effectively into the next chapter of their lives.

Ethical and professional standards should be followed in order to transition from the professional pastoral ties between the former pastor and the congregation. When all parties are intentional about the closure tasks, it helps to create space for new relationships to be established. When a pastoral relationship is dissolved, the nature and character of that relationship changes. Both pastor and congregation must disengage from what was and establish clear boundaries that enable all parties to engage and establish new beginnings. Because this work has the potential for a variety of difficulties, the following policy and guidelines have been adopted by the Presbytery to enhance the health and well-being of both the pastor and the congregation experiencing pastoral transition—including discovering healthy ways for congregations to relate to former pastors.

The pastoral relationship is very important, often deeply personal to people in a congregation. We realize the congregation for its part has built loyalties and meaningful relationships with the pastor and his/her family. While some may be happy to see a change in leadership, many will experience feelings of deep anxiety about the change, as well as grief over losing a personal counselor and confidant. This relationship has evolved through study, teaching, preaching, administering the sacraments of Holy Baptism and The Lord’s Supper, weddings, funerals, presence in times of crisis, and praying with and for members of the congregation, counseling, and shared leadership. From these times, there has been accumulated elements of trust, confidence, admiration, affection, fondness, respect, caring and love between the pastor and the congregation.

Ending such a relationship can be a trying and traumatic experience for the pastor, her/his/their family, and members of the congregation. It means “change,” which can often be difficult to accept and integrate. The following guidelines are intended to help all parties to say “goodbye” in a healthy way.

II. GUIDELINES

Common understandings of mutually agreed upon boundaries can work to the benefit of all parties concerned. Whether the pastor lives in the same community, or in a different community, there need to be some intentional objectives concerning new roles and relationships between the former pastor, their family and the congregation. Because potentially difficult situations can occur involving the relationship of a former pastor to their former congregation, the Committee on Ministry, in the spirit of love and understanding, has adopted these guidelines to assist pastors and congregations going through this important life-changing transition. The tenacity with which the policy guidelines must be followed becomes more critical the closer the former pastor lives to the congregation and the community from which they are leaving.

One important clear boundary is:

“When a pastor leaves a charge for whatever reason, there are bonds of affection that still tie that pastor and congregation together. Individuals among the church membership retain friendships with the former pastor. So on the day of dissolution and thereafter, the Presbytery through its Committee on Ministry takes the opportunity to remind church members and pastor that only the moderator of the session can invite a former pastor to participate in the life of the congregation in any professional or pastoral role. The Presbytery reiterates that a new era in the history of the congregation and the former pastor has begun, all parties are to rejoice and be glad in it.”

Prior to saying goodbye, it is incumbent upon the departing pastor to make sure that parishioners know that the pastor’s 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 will be free, in all respects, to make the adjustments necessary for the changes of leadership, interim and permanent, without the departing pastor’s influence. The departing pastor is the one in the professional leadership role and therefore is the one who takes the initiative and leads in this transition process so that the separation that occurs is anticipated and carried through with foresight and effectiveness.

The Standards of Ethical Conduct for ordained officers in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are applicable in the transition context, especially sections numbered II. 14-17. A copy of these standards are available for review and use in the COM Handbook.

A. The Role of the Committee on Ministry

The Committee on Ministry is responsible for assisting congregations and ministers in the transition following the dissolution of a pastoral relationship. When this is done with sensitivity and pastoral care, it can reduce the anxiety of all parties and help build the foundation for the next chapter in ministry for the congregation, former pastor, and new pastor. To this end, the COM shall take an active role in all transitions, including the relationship between the former pastor and the congregation.

COM Steps:

1. Immediately upon knowledge of a pastor’s anticipated departure, the COM shall arrange to meet with the Pastor and Session to introduce the Separation Ethics Policy and other related procedures of transition.

2. COM liaison may assist the pastor in writing a pastoral letter to the congregation regarding the Separation Ethics guidelines and the implications of the changed relationship including the need for boundaries. This letter is to be shared with the congregation prior to departure. It is best if such a letter is initiated, written, and presented by the pastor. It shall be read in the worship service as near as possible to the last Sunday the pastor is present and shall be printed in the congregational newsletter and/or mailed to all members and friends.

3. Former pastors shall negotiate a Boundaries Covenant with the COM enumerating acceptable and unacceptable behaviors of all parties (including family members, where appropriate). This document shall be signed by the former pastor, Clerk of Session and COM Leadership and remain a part of the Presbytery's records. The successor shall receive a copy of this covenant. The covenant can be reviewed whenever there is a substantial change in circumstances. A model for such a Boundaries Covenant is provided at the end of this document.

4. When a former pastor remains in the Presbytery, especially when they remain in the community of the congregation served, the COM shall continue to provide pastoral care for the former pastor, shall ensure their continued welcome in the work and ministry of the Presbytery, and shall respect the years of service provided the presbytery and former congregation. It shall actively engage in assisting the new pastor to establish a healthy relationship with the former pastor.

5. If a minister, even when retired, fails to honor the practices outlined in this policy and fails to abide by the mutually-agreed-upon behavioral covenant and will not cooperate with the COM to arrive at a behavior that is acceptable to the COM, the minister may be subject to the discipline of the presbytery. Such discipline should include a serious conversation with at least two members of the COM (one of whom should be the liaison with the church involved), outlining the two options and clarifying expectations for future behavior.

- The COM may initiate a disciplinary process under the Rules of Discipline, alleging failure to abide by the officer vows (1) to abide by the polity and discipline of the Presbyterian Church USA, and (2) to preserve the peace, unity, and purity of the church.,
- If the behavior persists after efforts to restrain it, the COM is prepared to take steps to effect renunciation of jurisdiction. According to G-2.0509, *“When a teaching elder persists in work disapproved by the presbytery having jurisdiction, the presbytery shall consult with the teaching elder and shall give notice of its disapproval. If after having been provided opportunity for consultation and upon written notice of its disapproval, the teaching elder persists in the work, the presbytery may then conclude that he or she has renounced the jurisdiction of this church.”* The COM deems that the category “work disapproved by the presbytery” includes continued behavior which the COM has made clear it is not disapproved.

B. The Role of the Former Pastor

The former pastor shall cease all pastoral activity and services in and with the congregation upon the effective date of dissolution. For this reason, the departing pastor should use every opportunity, prior to the last day of the relationship, to prepare the congregation for separation. This can include sermons, devotions, home visits, newsletters, etc.

The former pastor shall adhere to the Boundaries Covenant signed by all parties. Due care should be taken by the former pastor not to influence, directly or indirectly, by spoken, written, or electronic communication, the selection of groups chosen to nominate a successor, the selection of the successor, or the policies and practices of the successor. The former pastor best honors his/her ordination vows by exercising self-restraint regarding the business and spiritual well-being of the congregation. The former pastor may maintain friendships¹ with members of the congregation, but must avoid spoken, written, or electronic conversations regarding policies, practices, people or programs of that congregation insofar as they might be perceived as attempting to influence decisions or relationships within that congregation. Under no circumstances may the former pastor make public (or likely to be made public) statements or offer opinions critical of the interim or new pastor or staff.

The former pastor shall not pressure the new pastor to invite him/her to serve in any pastoral activity. This places an unfair burden on the current pastor. An appropriate response to congregation members and staff requests is to firmly communicate: ***“For the continued health of the congregation, it is inappropriate for me to perform any pastoral function or service now that I am no longer the pastor.”***

The former pastor may not accept invitations to preach in the former congregation or to assist or substitute for the installed pastor or interim pastor, except upon the invitation from the current pastor and Session and within the Boundaries Covenant. If the former pastor is approached prior to contact being made with the present pastor, an appropriate response is “_____ (name) is now your pastor. It is inappropriate to continue this conversation until he/she has been consulted.” The current Moderator shall ordinarily perform all weddings and funerals rather than deferring to the former pastor. It is incumbent upon the former pastor to notify the interim or successor whenever such a request is received.

By virtue of their office, interests and family, a pastor usually becomes a contributing member of the larger community. He/She/They may be involved in civic, ecumenical, educational, fraternal, service, governmental, and other groups, often serving on boards and committees or volunteering time. This results in the minister often being seen as representing a particular congregation and/or as pastor to people beyond the formal membership of the congregation served. Continuing as a member or attending functions as a participant or volunteering in a non-pastoral role is appropriate, provided it is made clear that it is no longer in his/her capacity as an the installed pastor of a specific congregation.

¹ It is important that “friends” understand that the pastoral relationship has come to an end. It does not mean the friendship has to end also. Friendships are priceless and are to be preserved, but the pastor must be clear about the new boundaries to prevent the friendship from being confused. **No** pastoral functioning whatsoever is appropriate: weddings, funerals, chaplain type hospital visits or nursing home visits, baptisms, etc.

A former pastor may be invited to become a Parish Associate of a former congregation only after an appropriate period of time has elapsed from the served congregation. Both new pastor and former pastor must consult with the COM prior to seeking Session approval for such an arrangement. This arrangement is contingent upon presbytery approval.

When a pastor retires from a congregation, the congregation may bestow upon him or her the honorary title of “Pastor Emeritus/Emerita” to convey their affection and gratitude. This may be done only after consultation with the COM and is subject to presbytery approval and takes effect only upon dissolution of the pastoral relationship. Former pastors are reminded that, even in this situation, the pastoral relationship has been dissolved – the relationship to the congregation as Pastor has ended and there are no responsibilities, expectations, or privileges attached to this title.

C. The Role of Family of the Former Pastor

One of the tensions inherent in ministry is that ministers serve churches, but they give up the privilege of being a member of a local congregation. For some, though certainly not for all, membership in the presbytery fills the void that membership in a congregation fills for most other Christians. The pastor’s family, however, usually become members of the congregation which the pastor serves. At the point of departure or retirement from pastoral ministry there is, typically, a sense of loss for the pastor’s spouse (and perhaps also for children who have remained in the congregation) which differs in quality from the loss experienced by the pastor. While a minister’s family does not lie within the COM’s jurisdiction, it does lie within our Christian concern. In the hope of loving one another as Christ loves us, the COM institutes a policy of pastoral care toward all ministers and their families around the time of departure or retirement, both to encourage them in their Christian walk as well as to assist the people in the ministry from which the departure or retirement is being made.

The pastor’s family during this time of transition will discover that the change is difficult and at times painful. Their situation comes to focus on three questions: Where to live? Where will their church membership be? How to handle church related friendships?

If the former pastor and family move to a new community the adjustment to their new life is somewhat easier. Their role in a new community and new church is entirely different from their years of experience in the previous congregation. In the new church of membership they are free to relate directly and freely with members of the new church and to share their gifts in the activities and structures of the new church.

If the former pastor and family remain in the same community there is no rule that says the family must give up its present church membership. If they retain their membership, the family’s closest friends are often in that congregation; however the family’s relationship with the congregation changes. Their friends need to be free to develop relationships with the new pastor and his/her spouse and family just as they did when the former pastor and family first came to the church.

While spouse or children might remain in the congregation, they too will need restraint and grace as they relate to the new leadership and the changes he/she will bring. If they hold office in the church they must be ready to be supportive and accepting of the new pastor. If, however, they feel they must

stay on to protect the legacy of the former pastor and/or programs, they should resign.

After retirement, a successful return by the family (including the former pastor) to the former church requires:

- full and open discussion and agreement of the interim or installed pastor
- a self-confident and non-threatened new pastor
- the former pastor must genuinely be willing to switch from being the shepherd to taking her/his place as one of the flock

However, if tensions emerge between the Session and/or new pastor and the former pastor's spouse and/or family members, the COM shall mediate and may determine it is in the best interests of all parties for the former pastor's spouse and/or family members to establish a relationship with another congregation. Good judgment and restraint will go a long way toward preventing such situations. If specific concerns need to be addressed, they should be included in the Boundaries Covenant.

D. The Role of the Session and Congregation

With the departure of the former pastor, primary responsibility for oversight of the relationship between the congregation and the former pastor (including his/her family members) becomes that of the Session, even after a new pastor is called and installed. It is thus incumbent upon the Session to continue to communicate and interpret this separation ethics policy to the congregation.

The Session should ensure that early in the interim or newly installed pastor's term, the COM liaison has reviewed this policy, the "Boundaries Covenant", and the role of the Session with the interim or newly installed pastor.

If situations arise where this policy must be applied, the Session is expected to assist all parties in doing so in a fair, compassionate, and pastoral manner. The Session may always seek the assistance of the COM or Presbytery Staff in interpreting and mediating such situations. The Congregation must remember that only the Moderator of the Session, (or in case of the inability to contact the Moderator, the Clerk of Session) can extend an invitation to the former pastor to perform a pastoral function or service.

It is ordinarily appropriate for the Congregation and/or members and the former pastor to discontinue contact on any social media. This may involve "unfriending/hiding people on Facebook," "not following" on Twitter or Instagram and/or "deleting" contacts. For example, automatic birthday wishes should cease, as things like this continue to remind individuals about the wonderful pastor that left and their pastoral relationship. It will require extreme discipline to resist even the most innocent interactions.

E. The Role of the Successor Pastor

While this policy is intended primarily to protect the congregation and the new pastor from inappropriate and unhealthy relationships with and by the former pastor, it is also incumbent upon the successor pastor to recognize the potential benefits of a healthy relationship with a former pastor,

especially when that pastor remains in the community. The former pastor has information, relationships, history, and influence that can facilitate the leadership transition when applied in a pastorally sensitive manner. The successor pastor is thus encouraged to work with the Session and COM to take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that a positive working relationship is established with the former pastor.

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Boundaries Covenant is a reminder of the importance of the relationship between the former pastor and congregation. To ensure a healthy transition from the current called pastor to a transitional pastor and then to the newly installed pastor, the congregation and departing pastor must exercise great self-restraint in order to allow time for the congregation to reflect on past ministry, dream about future ministries and allow for a relationship with future pastors to grow. How pastors and congregations say “Goodbye” is just as important as how they say “Hello” and “Welcome.” So we all (pastors, congregational leaders and members) need to model for one another healthy boundaries as our roles and responsibilities change. To effectively and graciously maintain such boundaries requires clarity and positive support of one another.

This Boundaries Covenant should be shared throughout the congregation so that others may understand the changes in the pastoral role and responsibilities and can cooperate as the church and pastor move into another phase of their respective lives.

This covenant will guide the future relationship between The Rev. _____ (hereafter referred to as “the pastor”) and the _____ Church of _____ MI (hereafter referred to as “the church”) effective on this date of dissolution _____. Both understand and accept the terms of this Boundaries Covenant in order that all pastoral and administrative duties with the church are terminated and that the relationship with new pastoral staff can develop in positive ways.

- A. The Pastor agrees to communicate to the entire congregation, friends of the church, and staff prior to the departure, so that it is clear that although the departing pastor has greatly valued their friendships, the pastor desires and has covenanted not to be in communication regarding the congregation, its life, any pastoral care or discussion of future leadership, congregational issues or events.
- B. It is agreed that the Pastor will not ordinarily expect to have the freedom to use the services of the church office or support staff after the dissolution date. It is also expected that all church property, including all church keys, will be returned to the Clerk of Session on the last day of service.
- C. It is agreed that the Pastor and the Church will hold one another in prayer for their emotional and spiritual well-being. It is agreed that the Pastor and the Church will refrain from all intentional pastoral interaction online or in person until a suitable period of time has passed.
- D. The Pastor agrees that (she/he/they) will not provide pastoral services for weddings, baptisms or funerals in the former congregation or with members of the former congregation. Planning and counseling are to be performed by the resident pastor, either interim or installed, or the Moderator of the Session. Former pastors may be invited to share in the former congregation’s life only by invitation of the current Moderator or in the absence of a moderator, the Session.

The Pastor agrees to notify the Moderator or the pastor of any requests received from members of the congregation with regards to pastoral services.

- E. The Pastor and the congregation agree to eliminate all social media connections and contacts that maintain a formal pastoral relationship that has been dissolved. Any social media contacts relating to normal friendships should be exercised with extreme caution not to violate any boundaries regarding discussions of the church, the pastor, policies, programs, staff, etc.
- F. The Pastor agrees that he/she/they will neither say nor listen to any uncomplimentary or critical remarks with members of the congregation concerning transitional or installed clergy.
- G. The Church and the Pastor agree that after a suitable period of time, if there is a desire on the part of any party to this Boundaries Covenant to review it, they may do so with all parties involved.

Any additions and/or exceptions to this Boundaries Covenant must be agreed to prior to signing this covenant and attached as an appendix and transmitted to the COM as part of the covenant.

In signing, the parties indicate a commitment to abide by the above Separation Ethics Policy and Boundaries Covenant and that they have received and understand and will abide by any COM decisions relative to this policy.

_____ (Date Signed)

_____ (Pastor)
Signature

_____ (Clerk of Session)
Signature

_____ (COM Designee)
Signature

