

STATEMENT OF ETHICS FOR MINISTERS OF THE WORD AND SACRAMENT DEPARTING/RETIRING FROM A CONGREGATION

Commission on Ministry
West Jersey Presbytery

Few circumstances in their professional lives challenge Ministers of the Word and Sacrament (hereafter referred to as “pastors” in this document) to exercise more wisdom and judgment than the ones raised when leaving a congregation. Somewhat ironically, the most difficult transitions are often those involving congregations in which the pastor has been warmly loved and appreciated. In addition to making a professional move, the pastor and her/his family are leaving supportive friends and community. The dynamics of the transition involve many in addition to the pastor and family, including the congregation, the session and staff, and certainly the new pastor or interim pastor who will soon begin to fill the void. When the transition involves the retirement of a pastor who elects to remain in the community and perhaps even in the community of the church, the issues become even more complex and challenging.

The *Book of Order* offers brief but important guidance in the matter of transitions: (G-2.0905) “*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.*”

While such transitions involve a number of entities (sessions, congregations, etc.), COM believes that the burden of responsibility for creating a healthy transition lies primarily with the professional behavior of the pastor who is leaving. Pastors must view the process of separation and transition as perhaps a final, but critical part of their ministry to the congregation they have served. Not to do so and act accordingly is a violation of professional ethics.

Practically, the exiting pastor must work to educate the session and congregation on the Presbyterian understanding of the transition. She/he ought to take great care in expressing her/his support of the process and the role that presbytery plays in it. Emotionally and spiritually, the exiting pastor can play a positive role in the welcome the interim or installed pastor will receive. Explaining the process and the reasons for it will also assist the exiting pastor in drawing and maintaining proper boundaries. The former pastor who works to make a good and positive transition also leaves the congregation with a final and selfless example of the love and care of the Good Shepherd for the beloved flock.

The following are brief guidelines based on the *Book of Order* and growing out of the experience of the COM. Representatives of the COM may review this policy statement with each pastor who is leaving/retiring from a congregation in the West Jersey Presbytery. The information below will also be presented to the Session of the congregation affected by the move (prior to the election of a PNC) as a part of the transition meeting conducted by the Stated Clerk. In addition, a pastoral letter regarding these guidelines shall be shared with the congregation. A sample letter and liturgy crafted by the Commission is attached.

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Guidelines for the Retiring/Departing Pastor

When Presbytery dissolves the pastoral relationship, that relationship is ended. Only the pastor duly installed by Presbytery or the pastor approved by the Presbytery for temporary service is authorized to perform pastoral duties among a particular congregation.

- a. The **retiring** pastor should make known his/her intentions with the Session of the church between 3 and 6 months prior to the retirement date. This allows the Session time to begin planning how to proceed for the interim time without a called pastor and to find ways to celebrate the ministry of the retiring pastor in such a way as to provide a fitting and mutually satisfactory good-bye. The retiring pastor should also be in contact with the Commission on Ministry (COM) and the Executive Presbyter as to his/her plans for retirement.
- b. The departing pastor should make known his/her intentions as soon as possible to facilitate the actions that are needed to terminate the pastoral relationship.
- c. The retiring/departing pastor should draft a letter to the congregation that explains to them the upcoming retirement/departure and the fact that the pastoral relationship ceases upon retirement/departure and that the functions of the pastor for that congregation are ended. This should be accomplished in a firm but pastoral manner. A sample letter is attached to this policy.
- d. If a retiring/departing pastor moves to another community the following actions are advised:
 1. It is essential to refrain from all pastoral contact, **including electronic and social media**.
 2. The retired/departed pastor shall remain sensitive to possible tensions that can arise from his/her presence within the congregation. The retired/departed pastor should make every effort to be supportive of his/her successor. Contacts from members of the former congregation shall always be referred to the Moderator of the session of the church.
- e. And if a retiring/departing pastor remains in the community, these **special guidelines** also need to be followed:
 1. It is **strongly recommended** that the retired/departed pastor become active in the work and worship of another congregation.
 2. A former pastor shall refrain from all pastoral functions and not accept any leadership responsibilities in his/her former church, including: teaching, visitation, or pulpit supply.
 3. A former pastor shall refrain from formal or informal participation in our comment on the work of a pastor nominating committee (PNC).
 4. Any invitations to participate in weddings or funerals or special services for members of the church should be taken under advisement with the stipulation that the former pastor assists and does not officiate. This invitation shall come from the Moderator of Session, with the approval of the COM.
 5. The conducting of funerals of non-members, defined as “persons never connected with the congregation,” might continue to be done, so long as the services do not

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occur in any place other than the funeral home or cemetery.

- 6. Weddings shall not be performed, given the context of the need for approval of weddings by the council of the church.
- f. A former pastor may not continue to live in a manse or church-provided housing following the termination date of service, nor may purchase said housing without the permission of the Commission on Ministry. Exceptions to this may be only in short-term, extenuating circumstances, not to exceed one month.

Guidelines for the Congregation of the Retiring/Departing Pastor

- a. Members of the congregation should not request a former pastor to perform pastoral duties.
- b. While there continues to be a bond of affection between members and the former pastor, members should not discuss, nor should the former pastor encourage discussion about, church business, issues, personalities, or events.
- c. Congregations should be encouraged to celebrate with the retiring/departing pastor the achievements within his/her time in the church and the parting should be within the bounds of mutual affection, admiration, and respect.

The Role of the Commission on Ministry

- a. The COM shall receive the request for retirement or departure and shall counsel the pastor in regard to the necessary steps forward to begin the process of closure with the congregation. In the case of retirement, the COM will counsel on the application for Pension benefits and determining whether to grant Honorably Retired status to the retiring pastor, with the retirement being approved by the Presbytery, as per the *Book of Order*.
- b. The COM shall counsel the Session of the church as to procedures necessary for calling interim pastors and called pastors and for providing continuing pastoral care for members of the congregation.
- c. The COM shall enforce the above statement for guidelines for retiring/departing pastors and shall respond immediately to any complaints involving the above statement for guidelines by counseling with the retired pastor and the congregation.

Pastor

Clerk of Session

Date

Date

Commission on Ministry

Date

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Revised 9/2017