

# **The Role of an Authorized Minister to a Former Ministry Setting**

**Resources for Congregations, Authorized Ministers,  
and  
Association Committees on Authorized Ministry**

**Gathered by the Church and Ministry Committee of the  
Black River-St. Lawrence Association of the New York Conference  
of the United Church of Christ**

**Approved by the New York Conference Commission on Ministry**

**2015**

## Introduction

Over the years, it became increasingly apparent to the members of the New York Conference Commission on Ministry that some kind of guidance was necessary for those occasions when pastors left a call. Not only was this guidance necessary for the clergy members, but also for those whom the pastors were leaving.

In 2013, The Rev. John Werley, a retired pastor from the Black River / St. Lawrence Association and a member of the NY Conference Commission on Ministry, started gathering resources on this subject. From these resources, he produced a document called “Proposed Guidelines for Pastors Leaving a Call” which was adopted by the Black River / St. Lawrence Association.

The Commission on Ministry encouraged Rev. Werley to continue his research, which resulted in the document you are about to read. The final draft was approved by the Commission on September 28, 2015, with the suggestion that the title be changed to the more inclusive “*The Role of an Authorized Minister to a Former Ministry Setting.*” It was sent on to the Conference Executive Council and Conference Board for approval at their January, 2016 meetings.

The Commission would like to thank The Rev. John Werley for the countless hours he spent on this project. We would also like to thank The Rev. David S. Gregory of the Hudson-Mohawk Association for his assistance in formatting the document. A special thanks to the Minnesota Conference for allowing us to use some of their material, and to The Rev. Emily C. Heath of the Vermont Conference for allowing us to reprint her essay.

We have lived with this project for two years, we have prayed over it, and now we commend it to you. May God bless you abundantly in your ministry.

Grace and peace,

The Rev. Dr. Ann M. Van Cleef, Chair,  
The New York Conference Commission on Ministry

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## **RESOURCE #1**

### **A Resource for Churches and Pastors: When a Pastor Leaves**

Affirmed by the MN Conference Committee on Ministry, July 24, 2008

Whenever any pastor leaves it is difficult for both the congregation and the pastor. The following is a digested version of a longer teaching document available from the Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ for guiding everyone through this change. The guidelines below come from reflection on the code of ethics and vows taken upon ordination and in response to the experiences of many pastors and churches that have walked this journey.

1. When the pastoral relationship between a minister and a congregation is dissolved, the nature and character of the relationship changes.
2. To fully engage and establish a new relationship with the next pastor, both the pastor that leaves and the congregation must disengage from their relationship. (As affirmed in the UCC Book of Worship, Order for Times of Passage: Farewell)
3. Congregation members should contact their current pastor for all types of pastoral services, within the congregation or any other setting. Previous pastors of a congregation should not perform pastoral services for members or family members of a previous congregation.
4. In general, previous pastors of a congregation should create some distance and space to allow for new relationships to form with the new pastor in a congregation and should not have contact with former parishioners or return to their former churches (unless there is an official invitation from the church governing board for an official event).
5. When one meets a former pastor at denominational or other wider church gatherings, there is no need to avoid one another, and general friendliness is hoped for and expected. But, conversations about the local church or personal needs are not appropriate, so as to honor the relationship and role of the new pastor in the congregation.

When a pastor leaves it is important that church members look to each other, their faith, their new pastoral leadership, and the people within the denomination; not to their former pastor. As in many positions of similar influence and responsibility, the former pastor bears the primary responsibility for maintaining the boundaries in the "past pastor" relationship. These guidelines help congregations welcome and connect with their new pastor. They also minister to the former pastor by giving them permission to let go and move on. For a more detailed discussion of the questions, ethics, and experiences of the relationship between pastors and previous congregations they have served, please see the document, "The relationship of ordained, commissioned, and/or licensed ministers to former parishes: A teaching document regarding common practices."

## **RESOURCE #2**

### **The Relationship of Ordained, Commissioned, and Licensed Ministers to Former Parishes:**

Affirmed July 24, 2008 as a teaching document regarding common practices by the Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ.

The United Church of Christ is a church of covenants. Among our greatest strengths are the covenants we make with one another about our life together. These covenants are stated in many different ways and places, including the Constitution and By-Laws of the United Church of Christ governing Conferences, Associations, and local churches; in the UCC Manual on Ministry; in the services of ordination, commissioning, and licensing, and in services of installation. **Ordained, Commissioned, and Licensed ministers are expected to represent and embody the covenants that make us who we are.**

Regarding the issue of the relationship of the authorized ministers to former parishes, there are several sections of the Ordained Ministers' Code (UCC Manual on Ministry, section I, pp. 11-19) that provide the foundation for the practices commonly observed throughout the church. These include:

- I will regard all persons with equal respect and concern and undertake to minister impartially.
- I will not perform pastoral services within a parish or for a member of a parish without the consent of the pastor of that parish.
- I will deal honorably with the record of my predecessor and successor.
- I will not, upon my termination and departure from a ministry position, interfere with, nor intrude upon the ministry of my successor.

In addition, in the Manual on Ministry chapter, "The Local Church in Relation to its Pastor" (section I, pp. 20-21) a section on Ethics in Ministry says, "We recognize that we have called our pastor as the pastoral leader of this local church, and we will not invite other pastors to provide pastoral services within this church or to members of this church without our pastor's consent."

This ethic is usually reiterated during services of closure when departing pastor declares that they "release this church from turning to him/her for pastoral services." We have found that such closure is extremely important in helping a congregation prepare appropriately to receive and affirm new pastoral leadership. **Closure needs to be clear and unambiguous.**

## Frequently Asked Questions:

### **1 . Why do we have this ethic? What is the problem with a former pastor being asked to do pastoral services for a member or family members of a former parish?**

When a former pastor returns for pastoral services this runs a significant risk of sending a confusing signal to the congregation that this pastor has not really brought closure to her/his pastoral relationship to the congregation. In addition, there is a great risk that returning for one person or one family will be felt as favoritism being shown by the pastor, in direct violation of the code of ministering impartially.

Further, when a former pastor returns, there is a great risk of interfering with the developing relationship between the congregation and its new pastor. While it certainly is true that a pastor of many years will know members of the congregation better than the new pastor, a new pastor never has a chance even to begin building relationships if the congregation continues to turn to a former pastor for pastoral service and the former pastor allows and encourages this.

### **2. Is it all right for a former pastor to return if the current pastor gives her/his permission?**

This can be a tricky matter. Once in awhile, the current pastor becomes aware of a compelling reason to invite the participation of a former pastor, and these invitations may be extended when in the judgment of the current pastor there are needs of both the family and of the church that may be met by such an invitation. Former pastors, when asked directly by a member or family member of a former parish are expected to respond something like this: "Thanks. I am genuinely honored to be asked, but as a matter of professional ethics I do not return to a former parish for pastoral services." They are not expected to say, "Yes, I'd love to, but you'll have to ask the current pastor (or the moderator, the Associate Conference Minister, etc.) for permission." Such a response puts the current pastor in a no win situation and is an indication that the former pastor is not willing to take responsibility for embodying the professional ethics commonly observed by ordained, commissioned, and licensed ministers.

### **3. What if the church is in a genuine in-between time (i.e. there isn't an interim minister or installed minister in place when a need arises or when planning needs to begin, such as for a funeral or a wedding)?**

Usually churches have made some arrangement for pastoral services in the in-between times. If so, that person should be contacted first. If the next pastor has been called (or is the recommended candidate of a search committee, soon to be

called) but has not yet arrived and no one else is officially on duty, the new person should be given the opportunity to respond. Sometimes a newly called, but not yet on duty pastor will invite the assistance of a former pastor in such circumstances. Another frequently used option is to invite help from a pastor from another nearby church or from a local chaplain or pastoral counselor.

#### **4. What if the event requiring pastoral services is not going to happen in the church building (i.e. a baptism at the seashore)?**

The issue is not where but whom. If the pastoral services are being provided for members or family members of the pastor's former parish, the same concerns apply. If a former pastor performs a baptism at the seashore for members or family members of a former parish, the risk is great that this will send a signal to the congregation that this former pastor has not really brought closure to his/her ministry in that congregation which then opens the door for more invitations to the former pastor or sets the stage for considerable unhappiness that occurs when some invitations are accepted and others are turned down.

There are, of course, endless numbers of scenarios involving former pastors and former parishioners where the usual covenants may blur. For example, a college student goes off to college and discovers that the pastor of her home church back in New Jersey is now the pastor of the church next door to her college. She becomes an Associate Member of this church, and now her former pastor is also her present, on-site pastor. When she decides to get married, she asks to be married in the college church by her former pastor who is also her present pastor even though there is a new pastor back home.

#### **5. What about former pastors continuing friendships with former parishioners?**

If former pastors remain in the church they once served (which occasionally happens in small communities, and there may be no other good options for a church for the former pastor and that pastor's family), former pastors who wish to maintain a friendship with former parishioners would be well advised to observe some boundaries in the relationship. First, they do not talk about the church in any way that even remotely might be interpreted as criticism or second-guessing the current pastor. Secondly, they do not perform pastoral functions for friends who are still members of the pastor's former parish.

**In fact, they should take great care not to behave in a way that even looks like pastoral activity, such as calling on friends who may be ill.** Although the pastor may believe that, "I am just making this call as a friend, not as a pastor," calling in

homes, hospitals, or nursing homes has most of the appearances of a pastoral activity and will be regarded as such by many in the congregation.

**6. What about family members of a former pastor who may wish to remain as members of the church after the pastor has moved on?**

This happens a lot—the pastor’s children grow up and decide to settle in the community where they grew up even after the pastor moves on. Or when a pastor dies and his/her family chooses to remain in the same community. When this happened, these remaining family members almost always experience change in their own role and “place” in the congregation. Sometimes that change is welcome, but sometimes it can be troubling to the family members. Sometimes it is also troubling to family members to watch another pastor lead the congregation and receive the attention that was once directed to the former pastor. In such cases, where there are other compatible churches available, it may be best for everyone for family members of the former pastor to plant new roots in another congregation.

When family members remain in a congregation, there may be times when a former pastor will come to a church event not as a former pastor but as a parent or grandparent, spouse or partner. When such occasions arise, the courteous practice is for the former pastor to contact the current pastor so that together the past and present pastors may find the most comfortable way for the former pastor to be present for special events where a family member is involved.

**7. Are there degrees of possible involvement coupled with elapsed time since the pastorate in question?**

It is almost **never** a good idea to return as a member to a church you previously served—no matter what the span of time. The local church has a long memory of its past and of those who have served the church. Legends develop. With memory comes a romanticism of the “way things used to be.” Even those who have joined the church since you resigned or retired will have heard the stories and will have already formulated an opinion of who and what you were in relationship to the church and its people. They, too, will have expectations of your participation in the church.

If you become an active member/participant in the church you previously served, your role will always be seen, in part, as pastor, teacher and leader in and for the life of the church. Your thoughts and opinions concerning the current leadership and ministry of the church will be sought out. There will be confusion and hurt feelings by the membership as to why you will not baptize that grandchild or do the memorial service for a long-standing member of the church whom you knew well or participate in the wedding of children you confirmed. There will be a comparison made of your



leadership and the current leadership of the church.

At best your presence will be ambivalent and ghost-like. At worst your presence will undermine the authority and presence of the current leadership.

**8. What about when a church wants to have a continuing relationship with a former pastor?**

Sometimes when a pastor retires and continues in the community where her/his former parish is located, churches ask if that pastor can continue to serve in some way. Using the freedom of our polity, churches have sometimes entered into covenants with retired pastors for continuing service. While these are done with the best of intentions, nevertheless all the concerns about relationship between former pastors and former churches stated in this document need to be considered before a church enters into such a relationship. If a church is contemplating a covenant relationship with a former pastor, the leadership is urged to contact an Associate Conference Minister or Conference Minister and/or the Chair of the Commission on Ministry for guidance.

**9. What about when a church wishes to honor a former pastor by granting him/her the title of “Pastor Emeritus?”**

Many churches have honored a former pastor, especially one who has retired, by granting the title, “Pastor Emeritus.” It is a way a church can express its love for a pastor at the time of his/her leaving. It does not mean that the retired pastor continues in a pastoral relationship with that church.

**10. What if a former pastor stays in the community and sets up a private counseling practice? Is it all right for him/her to counsel former parishioners?**

This is generally a risky thing to do. The net effect is that the former pastor is still functioning in a pastoral role with former parishioners, and closure of those relationships has not really happened. Pastors we know of who have tried to do this generally report that it has not worked very well.

**11. What about lay workers who have served in a ministry position but who are not ordained, licensed, or commissioned?**

Virtually all of the same ethical guidelines apply to lay workers who have served in a ministry position.

The best gift a church can give to a former pastor is to form strong pastoral bonds with the new pastor, so that the church has a healthy future. This gives the former pastor the deep satisfaction of knowing that her/his service there has continued to bear fruit.

There are countless circumstances where the usual covenants blur, where there may not be clear and easy answers. In all such occasions, common courtesy and careful attention by the pastors or former lay staff involved to the fundamental ethics of ministry will produce an amicable outcome.

## **RESOURCE #3**

### **The Ordained Minister's Code**

#### **The Ordained Ministry**

I believe that God calls the whole Church and every member to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ; that the privilege of witnessing to the gospel in church and society belongs to every baptized Christian; that God empowers the ministry of the Church and its members by the Holy Spirit; that the Church nurtures faith, evokes gifts, and equips its members for service; and that God calls certain of the Church's members to various forms of ministry in and on behalf of the Church

I have been called by God to be a minister of the Lord Jesus Christ, and ordained by the United Church of Christ to preach and teach the gospel, to administer the sacraments and rites of the Church, and to exercise pastoral care and leadership.

I will seek to witness to the ministry of Jesus Christ.

I will preach and teach the gospel without fear or favor. I will speak the truth in love.

I will administer the sacraments and rites of the Church with integrity.

I will diligently perform the work of ministry that I have agreed to perform.

*(This code and the Ethics and items below are equally binding on Commissioned and Licensed Ministers as well as Ordained Ministers.)*

#### **Partnership in Ministry**

I will nurture and offer my gifts for ministry to the Church. I will seek to call forth and nurture the gifts of others in the Church and join their gifts with mine for the sake of the mission of Jesus Christ and the health of the Church.

I will seek to understand, support, and interpret the diverse ministries of the Church and its members as carried out throughout the world. I will stand with those who risk personal well being because of actions taken in response to their Christian convictions.

I will work cooperatively and collegially with those whom I serve in the particular ministry to which I have been called.

I will stand in a supportive relationship with my colleagues in ordained, commissioned, and licensed ministry, offering and receiving counsel and support in times of need.

I will be an advocate for fair standards of compensation for all ordained and lay employees of the Church, particularly in the place where I serve.

I will be a responsible participant in the life and work of my Association, the Conference, and the

United Church of Christ.

I will be a responsible representative of the Church Universal and participate in those activities that strengthen its unity, witness, and mission.

I will seek the counsel of the Conference or Association Minister or the Association Committee on the Ministry should divisive tensions threaten my relationship with those with whom I minister.

### **The Ethics of Ministry**

I will regard all persons with equal respect and concern and undertake to minister impartially.

I will honor all confidences shared with me.

I will not use my position, power, or authority to exploit any person.

I will not use my position for personal financial gain, nor will I misuse the finances of the institution that I serve.

I will not perform pastoral services within a parish or for a member of a parish without the consent of the pastor of that parish.

I will deal honorably with the record of my predecessor and successor.

I will not, upon my termination and departure from a ministry position, interfere with nor intrude upon the ministry of my successor.

### **Growth in Ministry**

I will encourage and participate in the regular evaluation of my ministry.

I will seek to grow in faith, knowledge, and the practice of ministry through intentional continuing education, study, and devotional life.

I will cooperate with my Association in the periodic review of my ordained ministerial standing.

### **Commitments to Self and Family**

I will live a life that honors my commitments to my family.

I will honor my need for time for physical and spiritual renewal, recreation, and vacation.

I will honor my family's need for privacy and time together.

I will be a responsible steward of my personal and family finances. I will honor and accept responsibility for all debts that I incur.

I will attend to my physical well-being and avoid abusive behaviors and abusive use of substances.

## **RESOURCE #4**

### ***Sample Letter to Retiring/Departing Pastor from an Association Committee on Authorized Ministry:***

Dear Retiring/Departing Pastor,

Blessings to you as you move through this momentous transition in your life, and as you prepare to retire/depart to begin the next phase of your journey in ministry. We recognize your dedicated leadership as pastor and the very special role you have had in shaping the life of [congregation's name]. The Committee on Authorized Ministry will continue to support you and encourage your active participation in the (Name of Association) and look forward to your continued ministry as God's Spirit leads you.

You have invested your time, faith, love and life into [congregation's name] and its members as its pastor. You have been an integral part of their lives. You have developed relationships of respect and love. We recognize that leaving a congregation is hard and can be bittersweet.

The Committee on Authorized Ministry strives to promote healthy and faithful relationships between clergy and the congregations they have served. With this in mind we want to remind you, of several sentences found in "The Ordained Minister's Code" under the Ethics of Ministry from the United Church of Christ Manual on the Ministry. This section reads:

*I will not perform pastoral services within a parish or for a member of a parish without the consent of the pastor of that parish.*

*I will deal honorably with the record of my predecessor and successor.*

*I will not upon my termination and departure from a ministry position, interfere with nor intrude upon the ministry of my successor.*

We encourage you to remind the members and friends of the congregation from which you are retiring/departing as well as funeral directors and members of the community of this ethical responsibility.

In the near future, a member of the Committee on Authorized Ministry will be contacting you for an exit interview, to address any concerns you may have, and to help you move onto your new tomorrow.

Peace be with you

## **RESOURCE #5**

### ***Sample Letter to Congregation from an Association Committee on Authorized Ministry:***

Dear Members and Friends of [congregation's name]

God's grace be upon your congregation as it moves through this time of transition as the Rev. \_\_\_\_\_ moves toward retirement/new ministry. We recognize his/her dedicated leadership, your shared history, and the affection you hold for him/her. We further recognize that her/his leaving your congregation is difficult for you and that your future seems uncertain. Be assured that the New York Conference and the (Name of Association) will be with you as you move into a new chapter in the life of your church.

The Committee on Authorized Ministry strives to promote healthy and faithful relationships between clergy and the congregations. With this in mind we want to remind you of several sentences found in "The Ordained Ministers Code" under the Ethics of Ministry from the United Church of Christ Manual on the Ministry, as it relates to a retired/departed pastor. This section reads:

*"I will not perform pastoral services within a parish or for a member of a parish without the consent of the pastor of that parish.  
I will deal honorably with the record of my predecessor and successor.  
I will not, upon my termination and departure from a ministry position, interfere with, nor intrude upon the ministry of my successor."*

We emphasize this ethical responsibility because these departures are difficult. There may be the temptation to turn to your past pastor for advice and council. Also, you may be tempted to call him/her for funerals, weddings and other pastoral services. This is a natural inclination because you have a relationship with him/her. However, in the long term, this will neither serve your congregation nor your pastor once he/she is retired/departed. Requests of this nature, puts him/her in an awkward position of saying "no". As a congregation, you will need time to move through the interim and search process with a focus on the present and future. You also need to give your interim pastor and your next pastor an opportunity to establish his/her leadership and develop a relationship with you.

As your current pastor retires/departs, celebrate his/her ministry. Tell him/her what his/her leadership has meant to you. Bless him/her on his/her retirement/departure and send him/her into the next chapter of his/her journey in life with joy and appreciation.

Should you have any questions regarding this letter, please contact me, or a member of the (Name of Association) Committee on Authorized Ministry.

May the Spirit of God lead you now and into your future.

## **RESOURCE #6**

### **Pastor Emeritus or Emerita Designation**

At the time of a pastoral retirement, there are likely to be questions about designating the retiring pastor a "pastor emeritus" (male) or "pastor emerita" (female.) It is recommended that this decision be made at an appropriate time AFTER a new pastor has been called. The conferring of this honorary title celebrates the lifetime of ministry the retired pastor has performed. The honor is never automatic but is conferred on someone whose ministry has been one of distinguished service.

"Pastor Emeritus/a" is not a functional title; it does not mean that the pastor will continue to serve in any ministerial function in the congregation. If your church is considering this action, developing a brief and very clear description of the honor will be helpful in preventing boundary and role confusion for the former pastor, the current pastor, and the parishioners.

The title of pastor emeritus/a is never appropriate for a pastor who resigns from a church and plans to continue in active ministry.

### **THE PASTOR EMERITUS/EMERITA**

#### **Introduction**

You are no doubt reading this document because you have some interest in learning more about the role and function of the *pastor emeritus/a*. Your church governing board may be thinking about conferring this status. You may be given this recognition. You may be a church lay leader or a pastor who is wrestling with a predicament that is taking place because of confusions about roles and responsibilities related to *pastor emeritus/a*

The term "*Pastor Emeritus*" (male) or "*Pastor Emerita*" (female), is used by a local church of the United Church of Christ to honor a person whose lengthy ministry in that local church has been one of distinguished service. The designation recognizes an individual's formal retirement. Conferring this status is an act of a local church and is an honor that the church may wish to consider following the pastor's departure.

#### **Before Conferring**

It is important to know what the title means. The word "*Emeritus/a*" has to do with being retired from active service while retaining one's title as an honor. The retaining of title is offered because of merit earned during the time of active service. The honor is never an automatic one but rather is recognition of exceptional service. When someone is a *pastor emeritus/a*, that person and the local church need to be aware of several important facts. First, the person is receiving this very special honor because of the merit of service rendered. The previous ministry distinguished itself over a long period of time, usually a minimum of ten years. Both the person

honored and the local church need to have a sense of the specifics of the exceptional service that warrants the awarding of this honor.

Second, the person and the local church need to know that the person so honored is formally retired. This is a very tender point that must be made absolutely clear. When someone has served a local church with distinction over a long period of time, it can be difficult for both the person and the local church to sever functional ties. When ignored or resisted, painful moments of confusion and resentment can surface and consequently undercut cherished memories and ongoing relationships. It is for these reasons that PLL suggests that this honor not be considered until the pastor has been retired for a considerable period of time, preferably after the interim period has been completed and a new pastor has begun her/his ministry.

Third, it is very helpful for a local church to have written guidelines regarding the title *pastor emeritus/a*. The guidelines will not outline "roles and functions" because the title is an honorary one and not a functional one. Rather, the guidelines will reflect on responsibilities of both the *pastor emeritus/a* and the church members. Clarity is essential before the recognition is conferred in order to avoid unnecessary awkwardness.

**The following are suggestive of responsibilities involved in this honorary title:**

1. The *pastor emeritus/a* and members are to hold in regard the health and Vitality of the pastoral office and to do that by treating the present pastor (interim pastor or called pastor) as the pastor of that local church.
2. The local church may wish to include the name of the *pastor emeritus/a* on church stationary, the church web site, and other settings where such listing is appropriate.
3. The local church leadership, in consultation with the current minister, may wish to invite the retired pastor to play a specific role in particular church celebrations (such as anniversaries)
4. The local church will seek to inquire about and be concerned for the ongoing health and happiness of the *pastor emeritus/a* and will maintain contact to ensure ongoing concern and support.

**A Suggested Process for this Designation**

The initiative for conferring this honor customarily begins with the church governing board. They should draw up a formal resolution outlining the specific highlights of the retired pastor's ministry; it will also be important to include in the text of the resolution a description of the pastor's distinctive qualities that members continue to hold in high regard. The resolution is then presented to a meeting of the congregation for its approval. Following that action, a date is set for the presentation.



## Conferring the Recognition

Conferring takes place within the worship life of that local church. There will likely be other celebratory activities, but the actual conferring is a ritual act.

At some point in the worship service, it is appropriate for an officer of the local church to invite the pastor emeritus/a to listen to words to the following effect:

*“Recognizing your pastoral leadership of this congregation since the year \_\_\_\_\_, we bestow upon you the honor of being known to us and to others as Pastor Emeritus (or Pastor Emerita) of this congregation. “*

*"We remember with regard . . . (and here specifics are named)."*

*"In conferring this honor, we join with you in a continued appreciation for the pastoral office. And though you will no longer actively serve as pastor, your . . . (name some qualities) . . . help us to regard you and the pastoral office you held in our midst.*

*"In conferring this honor, we pledge ourselves to continued concern for your health and happiness. We will hold you in our prayers and cherish the contributions you have made.*

It is customary-and particularly meaningful for the person who represents the United Church of Christ as a denomination to be invited to participate in the conferring of this honor. A certificate related to *pastor emeritus/a* can be secured from Parish Life and Leadership. This certificate may be given to the person as a part of the act of conferring. The Conference/Association registrar should be notified that the church has taken this action.

## Maintaining the Honor Conferred

The present pastor, the *pastor emeritus/a*, and church members have a role to play in maintaining the honor conferred.

The present pastor can initiate active participation of the *pastor emeritus/a* at special celebrations in the life of the church.

The *pastor emeritus/a* will understand that all invitations for pastoral services are referred to the present pastor.

The local church and its members can be helpful by staying in touch and actively caring for the *pastor emeritus/a and family*. They can also remain aware of potential difficulties and actively avoid inappropriate pressures to involve the *pastor emeritus/a* in the regular duties of the present pastor

## **The Retiring Pastor Who Remains in the Community**

Is it wise for you to remain in the community ministered? NO. Is it sometimes necessary? YES.

It is simply not wise-for a host of reasons-for retiring/departing pastors to remain in the community where they ministered; rather, pastors are encouraged to make long-range plans that will involve relocating to another community. However, there are sometimes circumstances that make it impossible for the retiree/departee and spouse/partner to relocate. If you plan to remain in the area, you should consult as early as possible with designated UCC staff, the Committee on Ministry, and the president of the congregation. Talking with clergy friends and recently retired/departed pastors will be essential as you think through the potential challenges and complications of your situation. Ideally you should make it clear long before retirement/departure that you will become an active participant in another congregation. When involvement in another UCC church is impossible because of geographic limitations, some pastors may choose to participate in a congregation of another denomination.

It should be noted that special sensitivity is required on the part of the congregation, the pastor, and the pastor's family if the pastor has family members in the community (adult children, grandchildren) who will continue to be active in the church.

As the retiring/departing pastor, you clearly have the ethical responsibility to sever the pastoral relationship and to make absolutely clear your support for the new ministry. It is particularly important that you not engage in conversation about the work of the transition period, the work of the interim pastor, the overall search process, or the selection of the newly called pastor. In smaller communities where residents are likely to run into one another in informal settings, it may take "practice" on the part of parishioners, the retired/departed pastor, and the pastor's family members for this norm to be established.

Even for retired/departed clergy who exhibit the best of boundaries, your very presence in the community may hold back the potential growth of the members and the ministry of your successor. It helps to remember that the congregation must be truly free to discern its own future mission and ministry. You help create openness for the work of God's Spirit by stepping back as much as possible, thus relieving the parishioners of the worry that their decisions will somehow offend their beloved former pastor.

There have been rare situations where the retiree/departee and spouse/partner have successfully removed themselves from all contact with the church for a lengthy period of time and then have been able to gracefully make the transition back in the new role of "church member." Consideration of this possibility requires strong boundary commitments on the part of all parties. And such a step should not be explored during the interim period or during the early stages of a new pastor's ministry.

## **RESOURCE #7**

### **Pacific Northwest Conference of the United Church of Christ Committee on Ministry**

## **Policy for Clergy and Congregations Concluding Pastorates**

(This applies to all pastoral relationships, whether installed, interim, licensed, conference staff, or other.)

### **I. General Statement**

The Committee on Ministry (COM) of the Pacific Northwest Conference of the United Church of Christ (PNCUCC) recognizes through pastoral ministry, unique and powerful bonds are forged between clergy and congregation. When clergy leave a congregation, compelling reasons exist for all concerned to clearly: (1) dissolve their present relationship; (2) provide for a transition; and (3) establish new relationships for both the departing clergy, and the congregants of the local church. Just as pastor and congregation covenant with one another at the beginning of their mutual ministry, so must they each understand and honor their responsibilities at the conclusion of their formal relationship with one another. In so doing, they may honor their time of ministry to and with one another appropriately and within established ethical guidelines (*refer to UCC Manual on Ministry excerpt attached to this document*), and provide for the nurturing and effective development of new ministry.

The purpose of this policy is to facilitate the shift of leadership and responsibility from one pastor to another. This policy is intended to promote healthy beginnings and endings of pastoral relationships for all concerned: the arriving clergy and family, the departing clergy and family, and the congregations that must say goodbye to the familiar in order to welcome the new. No bright line clearly delineates appropriate and inappropriate behavior in all situations; rather, we invite honest consideration of and response to the basic question: "What is in the best interests of this congregation?"

### **II. Concluding Pastorates: Clergy**

- A. Clergy should make a complete break with a congregation for an extended period of time beyond the interim period to allow for the establishment and cultivation of new relationships. (In most cases 18-24 months beyond the interim period.) This break includes all forms of formal and informal communication between the departing clergyperson and members of the congregation. To include:
- Any and all forms of pastoral care
  - Phone calls, text messages and email correspondence
  - Social media.

In some instances a complete break in communication and interaction with former congregants is not possible, particularly as it relates to members of the clergy person's family and/or community activities and involvement. In these instances it is the clergy person's

responsibility to limit the interaction to that particular activity and ensure that issues related to the former church and congregation are not discussed.

If not accepting another call, upon departure from a congregation clergy are urged to consider serving as pulpit supply in another community, taking a planned sabbatical, an extended vacation and or other creative possibilities. We strongly encourage churches to make use of the liturgy for *Ending an Authorized Ministry* in the *Book of Worship of the United Church of Christ*.

B. Clergy should consider membership in another congregation, and must decline all requests for pastoral services (e.g. baptisms, weddings, funerals, hospital calling, etc.) in the church formerly served. The purpose of this is to facilitate the development of new relationships and to discourage lingering feelings of dependency within the congregation.

When sought by her successor, a departing pastor may seek to nurture a private, personal and positive relationship with her successor. However, under no circumstances should a departing clergy person become involved or interfere with the leadership of the incoming pastor.

C. Clergy are urged to consider their role of minister in the wider community, with sensitivity to a new pastor's need to establish himself in the wider community through participation and or membership in various community organizations and endeavors.

1. Clergy should refrain from initiating or responding to comments regarding their successor(s).

D. To maintain standing in the Conference, upon leaving their current position (whether interim, settled, or specialized ministry), all clergy shall contact COM to have an exit interview, using one of the following options:

1. meeting with the Eastside COM or a sub-committee of the Westside COM
2. meeting with the Conference Minister and a COM representative
3. invite COM or their designated representative to the church's exit interview
4. submit a written report to COM with a phone interview.

In conjunction with the exit interview, clergy will be presented with a copy of these requirements and asked to reaffirm their commitment and adherence.

E. "Pastor Emeritus" status is an honorary title with no specific pastoral functions This policy also applies to clergy who have been granted this honorary title.

F. Upon expiration of the required separation time period, if a clergy person **desires** to return to a former congregation as a member, the returning clergy **must** first meet with the COM, to discuss the parameters of said return.

Upon return to a former church, the utmost care and caution should be taken to avoid any interference with the ministry and leadership of the current pastor. Former clergy should decline all major offices of the congregation. The focus of all decision-making should rest

with the new pastor. Clergy are encouraged to utilize their skills, expertise and faith through conference boards and commissions or specialized ministries.

- G. Any problems or improprieties between the departing/returning clergy and the new clergy would ideally be dealt with in conversation between the clergy and should not involve members of the congregation. If issues are cannot be resolved they should be taken to the Conference Minister as soon as possible to facilitate a satisfactory resolution. The Conference Minister may choose to bring the issues to the attention of the COM.

### III. Concluding Pastorates: Congregations

Upon notification of a pastor's pending departure, COM will provide a copy of this policy to the congregational leadership (i.e. Moderator, Board Chair, etc.). Church Councils, Boards, PRC, etc. are encouraged to begin sharing this information and making congregants aware of what will be required of their departing pastor.

- A. Congregational members should encourage and allow departing clergy to make a complete break with the congregation for 18-24 months, beyond the interim period to enable the establishment and cultivation of new relationships.
- B. Congregational members should know and understand that departing clergy are strongly encouraged to consider membership in another congregation and are ethically bound to decline all requests for pastoral services (e.g. baptisms, weddings, funerals, hospital calling, etc.) in the church formerly served. The purpose of this is to facilitate the development of new relationships and to discourage lingering feelings of dependency within the congregation.
- C. Congregational members should recognize that, having called clergy to provide pastoral leadership within their church, they should not invite other clergy to provide pastoral services within the church or to members of the church. When special circumstances warrant this, they should **first** seek their current pastor's consent. The focus of all decision making should rest with the new pastor.
- D. Congregational members should know and understand that departing clergy are expected to decline to participate in the life of the congregation with discretion and consideration for the ministry of successor clergy. Furthermore, they should know and understand that clergy are encouraged to utilize their skills, expertise and faith through conference boards and commissions or specialized ministries instead of the local church.
- E. "Pastor Emeritus" status is an honorary title with no specific pastoral functions, and clergy holding such title are also bound by the provisions of this document.
- F. Any problems or improprieties between the departing clergy and the new clergy should be dealt with in conversation between the clergy. If issues are not resolved they should be taken to the Conference Minister as soon as possible to facilitate a satisfactory resolution. The Conference Minister may choose to bring the issues to the attention of the COM.

Additionally any problems or improprieties between the departing clergyperson and members of the congregation should also be brought to the attention of the Conference Minister.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The importance of clergy making clean breaks from congregations once served cannot be underestimated. It allows (1) new pastors to establish their ministries on a positive note, without interference or undue emotional influence; (2) congregations to experience the gifts and talents offered by their new clergy; and (3) departing clergy to leave their pastoral roles.

When exceptions arise, the focus of decision-making should always rest with the new pastor. The intention of this policy is to clarify roles and expectations for all concerned; to help new pastoral relationships take root; and to ease departing clergy's transition from pastor to peer in the hearts, minds and souls of pastors and congregations. Ethical provisions set out in the United Church of Christ (UCC) *Manual on Ministry* govern both clergy and members of the local church:

**For clergy:**

- I agree to sever all relationships and on-going communications with members of my former parish for a period of no less than 18-24 months.
  - I agree to discuss any exceptions to this requirement with COM.
- I will not perform pastoral services within a parish or for a member of a parish without the consent of the pastor of that parish.
- I will deal honorably with the record of my predecessor and successor.
- I will not, upon my termination and departure from a ministry position, interfere with nor intrude upon the ministry of my successor.
- Should I desire to return to my former parish as a church member or regular attendee, I agree to meet with COM prior to my return.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**For members of local churches:**

We recognize that we have called our pastor as the pastoral leader of this local church, and we will not invite another pastor to provide pastoral services within this church or to members of this church without our pastor's consent.

We will establish policies regarding baptism, communion, marriages, funerals, use of church facilities, and personnel in consultation with our pastor and will honor them in our life as a local church.

We acknowledge and support this policy placed upon our departing pastor by the Pacific Northwest Conference.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Moderator/Board Chair Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **DRAWING A LINE ON THE MOUNTAIN**

**Emily C. Heath**

*"The Lord said ..you shall set limits for the people all around, saying. 'Be careful not to go up to the mountain or to touch the edge of it. '" - Exodus 19:12*

In a couple of weeks my family and I are leaving the mountains of southern Vermont for the seacoast of New Hampshire. I've been called to serve a new congregation there as their pastor. That means that here in Vermont I am saying a lot of goodbyes to a community that I love.

A part of this process is reminding people of the pastoral boundaries I will now have to observe. All UCC ministers understand that when we leave a parish we no longer may return to officiate funerals, or weddings or baptisms. We know we can't be the first person former parishioners call when everything goes wrong. We know in short, that we are no longer the pastor of a congregation we have tried our best to serve well, usually for years.

And as hard as that is for us, we know that it's sometimes even harder for those we served. There's a temptation when faced with rules to look for a loophole, to deride them as pointless, or to justify your situation as somehow different. And yet, these rules didn't come out of nowhere. They came from experience and from the understanding that when a congregation calls a new pastor they also need to trust that God will work through that pastor to meet their church's needs.

Today's Scripture reminds us that even God drew boundaries with God's people. God tells Moses to tell the people not to touch the mountain. My guess is that the people had no idea why God had instituted this rule. Some probably even thought it pointless. But Scripture reminds us that God doesn't do it arbitrarily. God does it to protect the people, and to guide them to a better future.

What has been true for the earliest communities of faith is true for us still. Sometimes someone has to say "we can't do that." And sometimes someone has to hold the line, even when it might be easier not to. As I prepare to leave this literal mountain on which I live, I'm reminded of this more than ever. And I am grateful for the example.

### **Prayer**

God, thank you for setting the boundaries when we have needed it. And thank you for journeying with us all, even when it means we have to journey apart from ones with whom we have loved and served. Amen



