

Separation Ethics:  
Presbytery of South Alabama  
Adopted September 17, 2022  
Revised by Committee on Ministry, October 6, 2022

**Definition**

A former pastor is one whose service to a congregation as pastor, associate pastor, co pastor, any temporary pastoral relationship, or a commissioned ruling elder has, for any reason, come to an end. A new pastor is one who currently serves a congregation in any of the above named pastoral relationships. The term pastoral services refers to any duties or actions commonly understood to be associated with a pastor's role in the life of a congregation, including but not limited to baptisms, weddings, funerals, worship services, teaching events, or hospital visitations.

**The Former Pastor**

The former pastor, whether his/her residence is close or distant, must guard against perpetuating close ties with the former congregation. It is incumbent upon the former pastor to ascertain that parishioners know that her/his relationship with the congregation will come to an end. The former pastor should publicly announce that he/she will no longer be available for pastoral services following the stated date of termination. Thereafter, the former pastor shall fulfill that announced intention by declining all requests from members of the congregation for such pastoral services. In special situations, a former pastor may be called upon to assist in pastoral services by invitation from the new pastor and the approval of the session. The former pastor would not ordinarily conduct pastoral services but rather would assist the new pastor at his/her direction.

If the former pastor maintains residence in the community, she/he should seek a church home in another parish. The former pastor should not be a part of the worshiping or fellowship life of the congregation except upon the initiative and invitation of the new pastor. If such an invitation is extended, it should not occur until the next installed pastor has had an opportunity to establish relationships within the congregation.

When a church is without pastoral leadership (no installed or temporary pastor or Commissioned Ruling elder), a former pastor may accept the invitation of the Session to perform pastoral services if such invitation has been approved by the Session, after a good faith attempt to secure alternative pastoral support has been made, and received the concurrence of the COM moderator. This relationship should immediately cease if it is in any way causing conflict within the body.

The former pastor should not be involved, in any way, in the selection process of the new pastor nor become engaged in conversations with church members or church staff which offer opinions or criticism about the life of the congregation or the performance of the new pastor. The former pastor should help prepare the remaining staff for the impending separation, encouraging them to receive and welcome the new pastor, and making clear that she/he will not be available for counsel or advice regarding the life and ministry of the congregation.

Former pastors who are elected pastor emeritus are reminded that this is an honorary title and carries no job responsibilities or privileges unless they are approved by the session. Former pastors are still under the obligation of the presbytery's (or denomination's) sexual misconduct guidelines.

**The Session**

The session will assist the former pastor in interpreting the meaning of the end of a pastoral

relationship to the congregation. It is appropriate for the session to arrange for an occasion when the congregation and former pastor may formally say good-bye. The session will want to be sensitive to the feeling of loss experienced by members of the congregation while demonstrating through its actions the meaning of the end of the pastoral relationship. The session will help the members by encouraging them to see this as an opportunity for growth and change. This may be a time of listening to individuals and groups as well as a time for examining the present and future life and ministry of the church.

When a church is without pastoral leadership (no installed or temporary pastor or Commissioned Ruling elder) the Session with the concurrence of the COM moderator may invite a former pastor to perform pastoral services.

The session should refrain from being critical of their former pastor or of other church members to the new pastor.

### **Members of the Congregation**

Members of the congregation should remember that no matter how much they are attached to their former pastor, that person is no longer their pastor. Any desire on the part of members to have the former pastor participate in congregational life or services should be discussed not with the former pastor, but with the new pastor. Members should not call on the former pastor for any pastoral services. Any invitations to share in such services should be made only by the new pastor or, in the absence of installed/assigned pastoral leadership, by the Session.

When a church is without pastoral leadership (no installed or temporary pastor or Commissioned Ruling elder) and members desire a former pastor to be invited to provide pastoral duty, that request should be made to the Session and not the former pastor. The Session, after a good faith attempt to secure alternative pastoral support has been made, may, with the concurrence of the COM moderator, invite the former pastor to perform pastoral services.

This does not mean that friendships must come to an end. Members of the congregations and former pastors alike should realize that there is a difference between pastoral ties and personal friendships.

### **The New Pastor**

The new pastor can do much to prevent difficulties arising because of the presence of the former pastor. The new pastor should remember that the ties that bind the members of a congregation to a former pastor have been forged through the unique experience of the pastorate. The new pastor should recognize that the congregation's affection for the former pastor as an individual does not prevent the development of bonds with the new pastor. Further, the new pastor should refrain from any criticism of the former pastor.

### **Conclusion**

Because the pastoral relationship is very important, often deeply personal, and, in some cases, life-saving to people in the congregation, the dissolution of any pastoral relationship can become a highly charged emotional event. The separation ethics described above seek to promote;

1. Effective leadership
2. Congregational health and stability
3. The growth of both former and new pastors, along with members, in dealing with the pain, problems, and possibilities of separation
4. The ability of the session and congregation to move positively and effectively toward the future



COVENANT OF CLOSURE  
Presbytery of South Alabama

\_\_\_\_\_, the \_\_\_\_\_ Presbyterian Church, and the Committee on Ministry of the Presbytery of South Alabama, having discussed the intent and requirements of the Presbytery's policies regarding Separation Ethics enter into the following covenant:

1. I, \_\_\_\_\_ agree:

- a) not to become involved in any leadership or advisory role (public or private) in the \_\_\_\_\_ Presbyterian Church congregation; and
- b) not to intervene, support, or give advice to anyone involved in a congregational disagreement or dispute;
- c) not to officiate in any special events in the lives of former parishioners or of the congregation, including weddings, funerals, baptisms, worship leadership, church anniversary activities, etc. unless expressly invited by the Moderator of the Session;
- d) to refuse requests for pastoral services made by members of the congregation;
- e) to consult with the Moderator of Session prior to visiting the congregation, attending worship or attending a special event;
- f) to refrain from giving opinions or directions regarding church business
- g) to explain and affirm the above principles to the congregation in writing (by letter or newsletter)and/or the pulpit before departing.

It is understood that this policy does not affect or require termination of friendships with individuals in the \_\_\_\_\_ Presbyterian Church congregation.

2. The Session of the \_\_\_\_\_ Presbyterian Church agrees:

- a) to respect the terms of the Covenant agreed upon by Rev. \_\_\_\_\_ outlined above; and
- b) b) to interpret the terms of the Covenant to the congregation and to incorporate this agreement in the minutes of the congregational meeting when the pastoral relationship is dissolved; and
- c) to incorporate this agreement in the Session Minutes.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature, Pastor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature, Clerk of Session

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature, COM Representative