

How to Relate to Former Pastors, Retired Pastors, Or Other Ministers of the Word and Sacrament Worshipping and Involved within a Congregation

Guidelines for Church Members:

When the pastoral relationship between a minister and a congregation is dissolved by reason of retirement, a call to other service, or any other cause, the minister's relationship with members of the congregation is altered in ways that must be respected by all persons involved. The relationship that formerly existed between the minister as pastor and members of the congregation is no longer appropriate. The minister may continue to be a friend, and will continue to be a sister/brother in Christ. However, this minister is no longer the pastor.

An effort by a member of the congregation to continue the past relationship, such as asking the former pastor to perform some usual or customary pastoral service (wedding, funeral, baptism, etc.) creates an ethically awkward situation. While the former pastor may wish to honor the request (and certainly would not want to hurt feelings), ministerial etiquette and ethics make it inappropriate to render such services.

The same is true for Honorably Retired Ministers, Ministers of Word and Sacrament who are employed as professors or pastoral counselors, and Ministers at-large who worship and serve within the context of a local congregation. While these servants of Christ have many skills and talents that could be of service to the local congregation, it is a violation of ministerial etiquette and ethics to function without authorization in any manner that could be viewed by members of the congregation as "pastoral."

Effort should be made to schedule weddings, funerals, hospital calls, etc. so the current pastor, or pastors, can provide the required pastoral services.

Although a former pastor, a retired pastor, or a Minister of the Word and Sacrament serving in another capacity within the community is likely to be interested in the health of the congregation, it is imperative that members avoid discussing issues concerning the congregation, the current pastor/co-pastors, the staff, the Session, or any other aspect of congregational life with a former pastor or other ordained minister worshipping within the congregation. Such discussions are likely to be perceived as soliciting advice or counsel on church matters. It is in her/his best interest and for the health of the church that a former pastor distance herself/himself from the congregation and that other ministers not usurp the relationship between the current pastoral leadership and the congregation. Raising issues related to the congregation with a former pastor or other minister makes this more difficult and frequently puts her/him in

an awkward ethical situation.

It is inappropriate to take comments, concerns, or criticisms of the current pastor to a former pastor, retired pastor, or other Ministers of Word and Sacrament worshipping within the congregation. Attempts should be made to resolve such issues directly with the current pastor. If that fails, present the issues to the Session or Personnel Committee, if applicable. Should this prove unsatisfactory, further recourse is available through the Presbytery's Committee on Ministry. Any effort to involve a former pastor, retired pastor, or other Minister of Word and Sacrament in any issues between members and the current pastor will only confuse the situation and make matters worse. It will also put the former pastor, retired pastor, or other Minister of Word and Sacrament in an untenable ethical situation. While members of congregations are encouraged to avoid putting a pastor in such a position, it remains the responsibility of the pastor to maintain the appropriate boundaries.

Issues Specific to a Former Pastor:

As quickly as possible, re-define relationships with former pastors. A friendship based on common interests and personal compatibility is entirely appropriate. Such relationships with a former pastor may and should be continued as long as care is taken to avoid slipping into a pastor-parishioner relationship. Continue to be a colleague in ministry with the former pastor through the Presbytery, ecumenical, or community organizations. There may be other aspects of the relationship with a former pastor that will continue after termination of the pastor-parishioner relationship. All of these are appropriate and healthy, as long as care is taken to remember that a former pastor is no longer the pastor.

If the former pastor is leaving the community, say goodbyes and express affection and esteem in appropriate ways before she/he leaves the service of the congregation. This will help avoid continuing the relationship in inappropriate ways after the pastor has left the congregation.

Seek out the new pastor for pastoral care and support. During the transition from a former pastor to a new pastor, the task of the members of the congregation is to make the change to new leadership. Anything which aids this adjustment will contribute to the health of the congregation.

Work on developing an appropriate relationship with the new pastor. Talk about concerns and expectations for the congregation. Share expectations, hopes, and dreams for the pastoral relationship she/he will develop with each member.

Pray regularly for both current and former pastors, and the congregation.

Issues Specific to Retired Ministers or other Ministers of the Word and Sacrament Worshipping and Involved within a Congregation:

Many congregations are blessed to have Honorably Retired Ministers of Word and Sacrament participate regularly in the worship life of the church. They may have moved to the community to retire and get away, or they may have moved into the community to be closer to family, some of whom may even be members of the congregation. These men and women who have given their lives to the ministry can be wonderful assets to any congregation as long as care is taken to assure the same healthy and appropriate boundaries are clearly defined as with a former pastor.

There are also instances in which a Minister of the Word and Sacrament who serves in some other capacity rather than a pastor may worship within a congregation. Ministers also serve as chaplains, counselors, professors and teachers, governing body staff, directors of non-profit organizations, consultants, camp directors, and other various validated ministries. While these ministers can contribute greatly to the life and ministry of a particular church there must be clear boundaries set so they might not interfere with the healthy relationship between the pastor and the congregation.

It is inappropriate for any member of the congregation to seek counsel, solicit advice, or seek pastoral care from any minister, honorably retired or otherwise, who is not currently serving as pastor, co-pastor, or parish associate of the church. To draw an honorably retired minister into disputes between members and the current pastoral leadership will not only make matters worse but will put the retired minister in an awkward and untenable ethical situation.

In the same manner, regardless of their years of experience or depth of wisdom, it is inappropriate for any minister, honorably retired or otherwise, who is not currently serving as pastor or parish associate of a church to intrude or interfere in the ministry of the installed pastor unless the pastor specifically requests the assistance. Again, while members of congregations are encouraged to avoid involving a pastor not specifically serving that congregation, it remains the responsibility of the pastor to maintain the appropriate boundaries.