

**SAVANNAH PRESBYTERY SEPARATION ETHICS/FORMER PASTOR,
HONORABLY RETIRED PASTOR, PARISH ASSOCIATE, ASSOCIATE PASTOR,
AND CHRISTIAN EDUCATOR POLICY - WITH "BOUNDARIES" COVENANT**

Approved by the Committee on Ministry: 2/12/2008

Approved by Presbytery: 05/20/2008

SEPARATION ETHICS: "When Pastor and Congregation Say Goodbye"

[The following is indebted to the previous work of the COMs of the Presbytery of Los Ranchos, the Presbytery of Winnebago, and the Presbytery of Whitewater Valley.]

This paper 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 life together.

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. Because this work has the potential for a variety of difficulties,¹ the following policies have been adopted by the Presbytery of Savannah to enhance the health and well being of both our pastors and our congregations experiencing pastoral transitions, including discovering healthy ways for congregations to relate to former pastors.² While the spirit of the following guidelines are especially applicable when the pastor continues to live in or near the community served, they are intended to apply to all church professionals, and these pastors and professionals are encouraged to become familiar with what follows.³

BACKGROUND:

The relationship between a pastor and congregation is often deeply personal, built on an accumulation of shared transitional and transformational times in personal and corporate lives. It has evolved through teaching, preaching, sacraments, wedding, funerals, presence in times of crisis, praying with and for members, counseling, and shared leadership. The pastor has encouraged people in worship, equipped them for tasks, helped bring forth gifts, and prepared them for mission. From these times, there has accumulated elements of trust, confidence, admiration, affections, fondness, respect, and love. Ending such a relationship can be a trying and traumatic experience for both the pastor 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 say "goodbye."

SAYING GOODBYE:

The departing pastor must make sure parishioners know that her or his relationship as pastor of the congregation is coming to an end. It is essential that parishioners understand this is necessary for the

¹ When the pastoral relationship is dissolved, the nature and character of the relationship changes. Both pastor and congregation must disengage from what was and establish clear boundaries that enable all parties to engage and establish new relationships.

² A "Former Pastor" is one who no longer serves as pastor, associate pastor, 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 conclusion of contract.

³ This sentence was changed by the Committee on Ministry from "The following guidelines are especially applicable when the pastor continues to live in or near the community served and these pastors are encouraged to become familiar with what follows."

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congregation to be free, in all respects, to make the necessary changes in leadership without the departing pastor's influence. Because the pastor is in the professional leadership role, it is always the pastor's responsibility to initiate and lead in this transition process so that the separation is carried out with foresight and effectiveness in any setting for former church members (i.e. home baptisms, weddings in secular settings, etc.).

The "Standards of Ethical Conduct for Ordained Officers in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)" are applicable in the transition context, especially numbers 14 to 17.

14. *"I will deal honorably with the record of my predecessor and upon leaving a ministry or office speak and act in ways that support the ministry of my successor; "*
15. *"I will participate in the life of a ministry setting I left or from which I have retired only as directed by presbytery; "*
16. *"I will provide pastoral services for a congregation I previously served only as directed by the presbytery and provide pastoral services to members of other congregations only with the consent of their pastor (s); and*
17. *"I will consult with the Committee on Ministry in the presbytery of my residence regarding my involvement in any ministry setting during my retirement."*

- I. THE ROLE OF THE COMMITTEE ON MINISTRY.** The Committee on Ministry is responsible for assisting ministers and congregations 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 roll in all transitions, including implementing the following policies governing the relationship between the former pastor and the congregation.

First Steps: Immediately upon knowledge of a pastor's (impending) departure, the COM shall arrange to meet with the Pastor and Session to introduce these policies and to initiate any actions necessary to meet the requirements of the policy.

- 1.1.1. Pastoral letter.** A pastoral letter regarding these guidelines and the implications of the changed relationship (especially the need for boundaries) shall be shared with the congregation prior to the departure (or as soon thereafter as practical) of the pastor who is leaving or retiring. 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.

***Sample:** "Just as I have cherished the pastoral relationship we have had, I also cherish for you the opportunity to form a new pastoral relationship with those who will fill this position in the future. For this reason, I ask you to respect the professional boundaries of ministry and not ask me to officiate for weddings, funerals, baptisms, to make pastoral calls, or to provide counsel regarding personal situations or the life of the congregation. After your new pastor has been called and been here for sufficient time to have assumed the mantle of pastoral leadership, and if he or she and the session wishes to invite me to participate on occasion in the life of the church, I will gladly do so in support of your new pastor. Please let him or her take the initiative. I want only the best for this congregation and will do all that I can to insure the future health of your ministry and not to weaken the ministry of your pastor. Please continue to honor our respect and affection for one another by honoring these guidelines."*

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- 1.1.2. Remaining in the Presbytery. Former pastors, who remain as members of and/or within the bounds of the presbytery, shall negotiate with the Committee on Ministry a "Boundaries Covenant" enumerating acceptable and unacceptable behaviors of all parties (including family members, where appropriate). This document shall be signed by the former pastor, Session, and COM. The successor shall receive a copy of this covenant. The covenant shall be reviewed and renewed at least every five years, and shall be reviewed whenever there is a substantial change in circumstances. A model for such Covenant is provided at the end of this document.
- 1.1.3. Continued Care for Pastor Remaining in the Presbytery. When a former pastor remains in the Presbytery, and especially when they remain in the community of the congregation served, the Committee on Ministry shall continue to provide pastoral care for the former pastor, shall insure 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 newly installed pastor to establish a healthy relationship with the former pastor.
- 1.1.4. Persisting in Work Disapproved of by Presbytery. If a minister, even when retired, fails to honor the practices outlined in this policy and will not cooperate with the Committee on Ministry to arrive at a behavior that is appropriate and acceptable to the COM, the minister may be subject to disciplinary action⁴ according to the provisions of G-6.0702 and 6.0703 [GA, 2004, 78, 387, Item 05-02].

II. THE ROLE OF THE FORMER PASTOR:

- 1.2.1 Pastoral Relationship Ends with Dissolution of the Relationship. The former Pastor shall cease all pastoral activity and services in and with the congregation served as of the termination date of their Call. 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, devotions for meetings, sacraments, etc.
- 1.2.2 The "No Contact Norm". Normally, for two years following retirement or termination of service, and for the first year following their successor's installation, former pastors should not, except as provided for in the "Boundaries Covenant", perform pastoral functions at or for their former congregation. Due care should be taken 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 their ordination vows by exercising self-restraint regarding the business and spiritual well being of the congregation: he/she may maintain friendships⁵ 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

⁴ This is a change from the previous wording of "the minister may be subject to removal from the rolls of the presbytery"; this change has not been voted on officially by the Committee on Ministry as of 4/22/08

⁵ It is important that "friends" understand that the pastoral relationship has come to an end. It does not mean the friendship has to also. Friendships are priceless and are to be preserved, but the pastor must be clear about the new boundaries to prevent the friendship from becoming confused. No pastoral functioning is appropriate: weddings, funerals, chaplain type hospital visits, baptisms, etc.

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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 pastoral staff.

- 1.2.3 The "No Triangling Norm". Former pastors should never tell a member of their former congregation that they can perform services only at the request of the present pastor. This places an unfair burden on the current pastor. An appropriate response, firmly communicated, is *"For the continued health of the congregation, it is inappropriate for me to perform any pastoral function now that I am no longer the pastor."* If they do not accept this answer, it is best to refer them to the Stated Clerk or Executive Presbyter for an interpretation of the policy.
- 1.2.4 Participate by Invitation Only. The former pastor may accept invitations to preach in the former congregation, to assist or substitute for the installed pastor, or engage in pastoral activities after the new pastor has been installed for at least one year, but only upon invitation from the current pastor and Session and with a Covenant agreement as set forth in "1.1.2" above (G-14.0630). If the former pastor is approached prior to contact being made with the present pastor, an appropriate response is *"(New pastor's name) is now your pastor. It is inappropriate to continue this conversation until he/she has been consulted."* Whenever possible, the current Moderator should perform 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.]
- 1.2.5 Former Pastor and the Community: By virtue of their office, interests, and family, a pastor usually becomes a contributing member of the larger community. 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. This identity continues beyond the end of his/her service to the congregation. Continuing as a member or attending functions as a participant or volunteering in a non-pastoral role are appropriate, provided it is made clear that it is no longer in their capacity as an installed minister or pastor of a specific congregation. However, given the power of the role and out of respect for the new boundaries that need to be established, former pastors should not, for at least two years following retirement, resignation, or termination, perform any pastoral functions or role in the community that would be seen as functioning in a pastoral role unless provisions for doing so are specifically mentioned in the "Boundaries Covenant" with the Presbytery.
- 1.2.6 Parish Associate. After at least three years absence from the congregation served, a former pastor may be invited to become a Parish Associate following the procedures provided for in the *Book of Order*. Both the new pastor and former pastor must consult with the Committee on Ministry prior to seeking Session approval for such arrangement—and is contingent upon presbytery approval.
- 1.2.7 Pastor Emeritus. When a pastor Retires from a congregation, the congregation may bestow upon him or her the honorary title of *"Pastor Emeritus"* to convey their affection and gratitude. This may be done only after consultation with the Committee on Ministry, is subject to approval by the Presbytery, and takes effect only upon dissolution of the pastoral relationship.

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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.

1.2.8 **Family Members.** While most former pastors leave the immediate area of their former congregation, not all are able to do so. Normally, the presbytery has no jurisdiction over family members of the former pastor. However, if tensions emerge between the Session and/or new pastor and the former pastor (including the role of the former pastor's spouse and/or family in the life of the congregation), the Committee on Ministry shall mediate and may determine it is in the best interests of all parties for the former pastor (and spouse and/or family) 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".

1.2.9 Former pastors and their family shall have access to the Committee on Ministry to assist in mediating situations where the new pastor is unable or unwilling to relate positively to a former pastor who must remain in the community. Special care shall be taken to clarify procedures for mediating any difficulties that MAY arise from behaviors of the former pastor, the new pastor, or the congregation.

III. THE ROLE THE SESSION AND CONGREGATION. With the departure of the former pastor, primary responsibility to oversight of the relationship between the congregation and the former pastor becomes that of Session, even after a new pastor is called and installed. It is thus incumbent upon the Session to continue to communicate and interpret these policies to the congregation.

1.3.1 If situations arise where these policies 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 Presbytery staff and/or the Committee on Ministry in interpreting and mediating such situations.

1.3.1.1 This includes arranging for a meeting early in the newly installed minister's term, including a representative of the Committee on Ministry, to review this policy, the Covenant agreement, and the role of the Session in assisting the newly installed pastor in implementing the policy.

1.3.2 It is the Session's responsibility to mediate when the congregation or former pastor does not respect the boundaries established under this policies or the Covenant Agreement.

1.3.3 **The Congregation.** Until such time as the newly installed pastor has had time to establish their leadership role, the congregation should be regularly reminded of the boundaries established under these policies and the "Boundaries Covenant". It is unfair to expect the newly installed pastor to have to interpret or enforce them.

1.3.4 When a pastoral relationship with a congregation ends, there are bonds of affection that continue to be cherished and valued. Friendships continue, but the professional pastoral relationship must not. In order to avoid difficult situations and to encourage the new pastoral relationship that needs to be established, Savannah Presbytery requests that Session regularly remind the congregation of G-14.0630: **"Former pastors, associate pastors, and ministers**

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who do not have a pastoral relationship with the particular church as defined in this chapter may officiate at services for members of the church, or at services within its properties, only upon invitation from the moderator of the session or, in case of the inability to contact the moderator, from the Clerk of Session."

IV. THE NEWLY INSTALLED PASTOR. While the above policies are intended primarily to protect the congregation and newly installed pastor from inappropriate and unhealthy relationships with and by the former pastor, it is also incumbent upon the newly installed 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 newly installed pastor is thus encouraged to work with the Session and Committee on Ministry 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
Presbytery of Savannah**

*{Normally this Covenant will be read and signed during a service of worship of the congregation.
Copies shall be kept by the Pastor, Clerk of Session, and Presbytery.}*

This covenant will guide the future relationship between the Rev. _____ (hereafter referred to as "the pastor") and the _____ Presbyterian Church of _____, Georgia (hereafter referred to as "the church") who both understand and accept the terms of this covenant in order that the relationships with new pastoral staff can develop in positive ways.

This covenant is designed to set healthy boundaries in the process of separation from any further pastoral duties as of _____. Both Pastor & Session (on behalf of the congregation) mutually agree to support the following conditions of the covenant:

- 1. As of the above date, the pastor will relinquish all pastoral and administrative duties and will no longer function as part of the pastoral or administrative team of the church.**
- 2. The pastor is determined to be supportive of future pastoral and lay leadership of the church and will refuse to receive or participate in any negative comments, conversations or activities which might undermine any program or person of the church.**
- 3. Any future contacts which may occur between the pastor and the congregation will be as friends and not in a pastor/parishioner relationship. The pastor will not participate in any weddings, funerals, baptisms, nor engage in any hospital or pastoral visitation or serving of Holy Communion unless requested by the Session (which includes the installed Pastor/Head of Staff). This is intended to allow the new pastoral relationship to develop. [Exceptions to this provision must be agreed to prior to signing this Covenant.]**

This covenant is offered to the church for the sole purpose of strengthening the ministry of the church in the future. It grows out of a deep gratitude for the special relationship that develops between pastor and congregation

In signing, the parties indicate a commitment to abide by the above "Boundaries Covenant" and that they have received, understand, and will abide by the "Separation Ethics" policy of the Presbytery of Savannah.

(Clerk of Session)

(The Pastor)

(Moderator of the Committee on Ministry)

(Stated Clerk of the Presbytery)

(Next Installed Pastor)

(Date Signed)

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MINISTERIAL ETHICS

This procedure paper assumes familiarity with and adherence to the denomination's Standards of Ethical Conduct (1998) for Pastors and Officers; the Sexual Misconduct Policy of the Presbytery of Savannah; and some exposure to the need for professional boundaries. It also assumes that pastors practice honesty and purity of conduct and, consistent with Constitutional and legal standards, will maintain appropriate confidentiality. This set of guidelines attempts to address several specific behaviors and conduct with regard to fellow Ministers of Word and Sacrament⁶ and congregations.

1. **GOSSIP VS DUTY.** Every minister admitted to presbytery membership is entitled to respect and Christian consideration. We are never to make judgmental or disparaging remarks about other ministers without seeking to determine all facts. When we are aware of unacceptable behavior by colleagues in ministry, we are called to pursue the advice of scriptures and go first to that person to seek reconciliation and/or their response. If we are unwilling to do this, we are to remain silent. If they are unwilling to correct such behavior, our constitution provides for appropriate remedies.
2. **MINISTER AND NON-MEMBER.** When a minister is called upon to officiate at a wedding, funeral, or baptism for families who are not members of a Presbyterian congregation, the minister should first determine if they are church members. If there is no membership, this may be an opportunity to counsel them toward membership. If they are members of a congregation, Presbyterian or otherwise, the minister should use all reasonable measures of persuasion to encourage them to use the services of the pastor of that church. If such effort fails, the minister, with the knowledge of those seeking such service, shall inform their pastor of the contemplated service and explain the circumstances. In no case shall a minister officiate at a service for a member of a neighboring church, Presbyterian or otherwise, without making every effort to contact and obtain the permission of the pastor of that church.
3. **THE MINISTER AND NEIGHBORING CHURCHES.** A pastor should never knowingly make pastoral contact with a member of another church in the community unless that person takes the initiative and explicitly makes known that he/she is actively seeking another church home or is seeking spiritual counsel regarding their membership. Pastors should encourage the same behavior among their own members. [This does not preclude pastors covering for each other while on vacation, study leave, sabbatical, etc.]
4. **THE MINISTER AND PRESBYTERY.** All ministers are appointed by, installed by, or validated by the Presbytery. Any change in the pastoral relationship ("Call") including changes in compensation, must be approved by the Presbytery. All members of Presbytery are expected to participate in the life, ministry, and mission of the Presbytery and such expectation shall be included in the Call. Failure to live up to this expectation is a matter for review by the Committee on Ministry.
5. **THE MINISTER AND STAFF.** While a pastor serves as Head of Staff in a congregation and bears the responsibilities this description implies, the spirit within the staff should be one of mutual respect and common ministry where all bring their particular gifts to the work of building of the Body of Christ. To this end, each should be understanding of the limitations and mistakes of others and seek to give support, guidance, and help when needed. It is never appropriate for any member of a church

⁶ "Minister of Word and Sacrament" denotes those ordained to office and in this paper is referenced as "minister". When the term Pastor is used, it in reference to those serving congregations.

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staff publicly to criticize, speak negatively about, or seek to demean the character or performance or gifts of another member of the staff. Any criticism or complaint should be addressed through the appropriate processes of the Session. When disagreements arise between staff members, every effort should be made to settle the differences privately and amicably within the structures provided for by the denomination and congregation. If unable to do so, the matter should be referred to the appropriate body of Session or to Presbytery's Committee on Ministry for counsel and mediation.

6. **THE MINISTER AS INTERIM PASTOR.** The purpose of interim ministry is to provide pastoral service and to prepare a congregation for a relationship with new pastoral leadership through accomplishing identified goals for the interim period. Interim pastors will not seek to build loyalties to self, but to Christ and to the Church, his Body on earth. **A Minister serving in a temporary pastoral relationship other than organizing pastor is not eligible to serve that church in the next permanent or designated pastoral relationship. A presbytery may choose to allow a temporary supply become the next installed pastor by a two-thirds vote of the presbytery. (G-14.0551)**

The Interim Pastor shall regularly and intentionally make clear to the congregation that he/she is not, and cannot be, a candidate for the installed position for reasons having to do with the long term health of the congregation.

Interim pastor shall normally be expected to have completed at least one week of a presbytery recognized training program. **No Interim contract will be renewed beyond one year without at least one week of training. If not certified as an Interim, Certification shall be to obtained before any contract will be renewed.** Interims are also expected to participate in meetings of the presbytery's Interim Pastor Network.