

Ethical Guidelines for Ministers Departing from Congregations

The departure of a minister from a congregation can be an emotional experience for both the minister and the parishioners. Whether because of retirement or a new call, fitness concerns or a decreasing “fit” between minister and congregation, a breadth of emotions will occur during the transition. It is the responsibility of the departing minister to set appropriate boundaries with their former congregation and parishioners, in order to facilitate the church’s ability to build a positive relationship with its new minister. This process also enables the minister to move into a new ministry setting or into retirement with a sense of release and clearness. This is in keeping with the Ministerial Code of Ethics for Ordained, Commissioned, and Licensed Ministers.

It is the expectation that “[u]pon departure, [a] pastor will not return to serve congregation nor serve members of the congregation in a pastoral capacity. For a minimum of one year up to three years, a minister will observe a no-contact boundary with congregants and will teach congregants to observe the same. This enables the past minister to fulfill the ministerial code of ethics, in support of the congregation’s relationship-building with a new minister. Re-establishing contact is only after negotiation with the new minister, potentially in dialogue with a wider church representative.”¹

In conversation with the local Committee on Ministry, a minister should develop an overall “departure ethics plan” that is in accord with the Code of Ethics and by which they covenant to abide following the departure. This plan should be specific and address the minister’s boundaries with the congregation, with the wider community, and with social media, parts of which are addressed below. The plan should be communicated clearly to lay leaders and the congregation.

The minister should also use the guidance from the resource “The Minister’s Exit Tasks,” found on page 56 of the *Conference User Guide: UCC Search and Call Tools*, available here: <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/User-Guide.pdf>.

¹ From *A Brief Dictionary of Pastoral Positions*, developed by the Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization (MESA) Ministry Team with judicatory staff, 12/2014.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRANSITIONS

1. Church Boundaries:

- a) The departing minister should strive to leave with grace, expressing gratitude for the time of shared ministry and encouraging the congregation to bond with its next minister.
- b) The minister should state clearly that they will no longer be available to the congregation or affiliated persons for weddings, baptisms, funerals, church activities, pastoral care, etc., and then the minister should follow through on this commitment.
- c) The minister should say “goodbye” – through an exit interview, through worship² – and then practice saying “hello” to their new ministry setting or to their new reality of retirement.

2. Community Boundaries:

- a) The authorized minister should inform nursing homes or other care facilities that they will not be available for Bible study, worship services, or other pastoral duties following their departure date.
- b) The authorized minister should inform area funeral homes that they will no longer be available for funerals or memorial services following their departure date. They should request that funeral directors direct requests to the new pastor of the congregation.
- c) When the authorized minister’s portfolio has included specialized duties (e.g. Minister of Music, Minister of Social Justice, etc.), the authorized minister should inform organizations with whom the minister has partnered that they will no longer be available for this partnership, and encourage those settings to invite the incoming minister’s participation.
- d) The authorized minister should inform any other places where they have provided general community ministry (City Council meetings, Rotary Club, Planned Parenthood, ecumenical worship partnerships, etc.) that they will not be available to offer pastoral services (such as guest preaching, opening/closing prayers, musical leadership) following their departure date, and encourage those settings to invite the incoming minister’s participation.
- e) It is recommended that the minister resign from any community board or leadership positions held by virtue of their position in the congregation.

² The UCC *Book of Worship* has a Liturgy for Departure that begins on page 252.

3. Social Media Boundaries³:

- 1) Prior to departure, the authorized minister should pass along administrator duties, remove their own administrator status, and share password information with someone else in the congregation for all ministry-related pages, groups and accounts.
- 2) Authorized ministers should discern carefully whether they will unfriend/unfollow parishioners and others with whom they've had a pastoral relationship or move them to a more restricted list.⁴ Ministers should prioritize the needs of the ministry setting and whoever will follow in ministerial leadership over their own desires to maintain those relationships (or the desires of parishioners to stay in contact). Ministers should also be consistent: the practice should be to either unfriend/unfollow everyone from that setting, or move them all to a restricted list. Authorized ministers should communicate this policy to the congregation so that there is no confusion.
- 3) Authorized ministers must refrain from providing pastoral care through digital communication after the end date of their contract/call/covenant with their community of faith. Continuing to provide pastoral care through social media interferes with the ministry of one's successor and is a violation of the Minister's Code of Ethics.
- 4) Following a period of 1-3 years, authorized ministers should discern whether they will change their privacy settings and/or begin to accept friend requests of former parishioners.
- 5) Ministers should not initiate friend/follow requests, and they must continue to refrain from providing pastoral care through digital communication to former parishioners.

4. Boundaries in the next ministry setting:

- a) The minister should spend their time getting to know the new ministry setting in depth.
- b) The minister should transfer their local church membership and their ministerial standing to the new ministry setting as soon as possible.
- c) If the minister's next ministry setting will potentially put the minister in continued contact with the local church (such as a judicatory position in the same conference), the conference and the local church must discuss how to navigate this appropriately. When possible, it is

³ This section comes from the MESA resource "Social Media and Boundaries for Authorized Ministers," and includes information from the Connecticut Conference's resource, "Internet Safety Guidelines," which is available here: <http://www.ctucc.org/resources/onlinesafetyguidelines.html>.

⁴ Adam Cleaveland makes compelling arguments for both options here: <https://alban.org/archive/pastoral-transitions-in-the-age-of-social-media/>

best for another staff person to offer appropriate leadership to the former ministry setting.

- d) Similarly, if the minister goes to serve in a new congregation within the same association, the departed minister and the new minister are encouraged to have some conversation, facilitated by the Committee on Ministry, regarding continued ecclesial boundaries. Examples may include the following: If members from the former church show up to worship in the new ministry setting, the authorized minister should encourage them to continue their relationship in the former ministry setting. When the new minister is installed, the former minister should send representatives from their new setting, but should exercise care and restraint in discerning whether to attend personally. When there are association events (including worship services) at the former congregation, the former minister and the current minister should discern appropriate roles for the former minister (including perhaps no role).

BEST PRACTICES IN RETIREMENT

When a minister retires from a ministry setting, the boundaries outlined above are still expected. A retired minister should transfer their church membership (and ministerial standing, if appropriate) upon their departure from a congregation at the point of retirement. This will facilitate the retired minister's ability to build relationships in a new community and in a new role.

Recognizing that some retired clergy remain in the communities they have served prior to their retirement, it nevertheless remains the best practice for the minister to not participate in the life of the church for a period of 1-3 years, determined in conversation with the local Committee on Ministry and the incoming minister. It should be understood by the retiring minister and the congregation that "not participate" is comprehensive, including such events as funerals, wedding, and baptisms for parishioners, for persons with informal connections to the congregation, and for the wider community.

Mindful that retired ministers are still called by God, the retiring minister should be in touch with the Committee on Ministry to explore what peer groups are available for retired clergy in the area to help them live into their calling in retirement and to continue to live healthy, robust, and self-differentiated lives.

When a pastor retires and is given the honorary title “Pastor Emeritus/a,” it should be clear that such a title is in recognition of exceptional service in a ministry setting and a sign of that congregation’s high regard for the departed minister. The role of a “Pastor Emeritus/a” and any attendant expectations should be named explicitly and renegotiated at regular intervals. In many cases, a “Pastor Emeritus/a” title is honorary and confers no pastoral responsibilities or expectations, although in some cultural contexts, the role of a retired minister is understood in different and very specific ways. Sensitivity to the cultural norms of a community as well as healthy boundaries should be attended to in these situations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MINISTERS IN SPECIALIZED SETTINGS

When an authorized minister departs or retires from ministry in a specialized ministry setting, the boundaries outlined above are still held as best practices, although it is important to note several nuances.

- 1) **Boundaries with Ministry Setting:** Similar to an authorized minister departing from a congregation, a minister departing from a specialized ministry setting should inform the setting that they will be unavailable for pastoral care, Bible study, special services (funerals, weddings, baptisms, etc.), preaching, and teaching.
- 2) **Boundaries with Community:**
 - a) The departing minister should not represent the ministry setting in any context following the departure date, e.g. a hospital chaplain representing their former employer at a health care conference or a retired national officer representing the denomination at an ecumenical gathering.
 - b) Especially in judicatory, academic, and publishing ministries, in which the wisdom and experience gained in one setting contributes to the public voice and platform of a particular minister, the counsel of the minister’s Committee on Ministry should be sought in determining whether and for how long a period of absence from public speaking (e.g. preaching, lecturing) following a minister’s departure or retirement from such a ministry may be appropriate.

3) Boundaries in Social Media:

- a) Prior to departure, a minister should pass along all administrator duties and passwords for all ministry-related social media pages.
- b) An authorized minister who has served in a pastoral role in a specialized setting should discern whether to unfriend/unfollow those to whom the minister has provided counsel and care, or to move them to a more restricted list. The minister must refrain from providing pastoral care or seeking out continued relationships through digital communication with those persons who were in the minister's care.
- c) A minister who has not served in a pastoral role should likewise take care not to seek out continued relationships with those who were related to the former ministry setting, and should decline to discuss the state or events of their former ministry setting with all persons – instead encouraging others to speak with new leaders in the ministry setting.

Regardless of exceptions that may be made and nuances that may be relevant to distinct ministry settings, boundaries for a minister's departure or transition should be discussed with a Committee on Ministry so that the overseeing body can support and hold accountable the authorized minister during a season of change. We again encourage the minister to make use of the guidance from the resource "The Minister's Exit Tasks," found on page 56 of the Conference User Guide: UCC Search and Call Tools, available here: <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/User-Guide.pdf>.