

**Presbytery of South Dakota  
Separation Ethics Guidelines**

**Table of Contents**

I.	THE BACKGROUND TO THESE GUIDELINES	3
II.	THE GUIDELINES	3
A.	Saying Goodbye	3
1.	Saying Goodbye to accept a call a distance away	3
2.	Saying Goodbye but remaining a neighbor	4
3.	When one is elected Pastor Emeritus	4
B.	Responsibilities in Saying Goodbye	5
1.	Responsibilities of the departing pastor	5
2.	Responsibilities of the Session	8
3.	Responsibilities of the Committee on Ministry	9

## I. THE BACKGROUND TO THESE GUIDELINES

The Pastoral relationship is very important, often deeply personal, and, in some cases, life-saving to people in a congregation. This relationship evolves through study, teaching, preaching, administering the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, weddings, funerals, presence in crisis, and praying with and for members of the congregation. With the leadership of a congregation and particularly with the elders, the pastor works to encourage the people in the worship and service of God, equipping them for their tasks within the church and their mission in the world. In all of these dimensions of the pastoral relationship there are the elements of trust, confidence, admiration, affection, fondness, caring, and love.

The ending of the pastoral relationship is often a trying and traumatic experience for both the pastor and the members of a congregation. It always means change for the life of the pastor involved and the congregation. Therefore, in the light of our Book of Order and the best of our traditions, the following guidelines represent what the departing pastor and the congregation will want to do as they face the situation of pastor and congregation saying "Goodbye."

## II. THE GUIDELINES

### A. SAYING GOODBYE

The need to say goodbye to a congregation occurs for one of several reasons. A pastor may receive a call to another field of service. A pastor may retire. A pastor may decide to leave the pastoral ministry and enter another area of service. The presbytery may, for cause, take the initiative to dissolve the relationship. This break can be a difficult time for both the pastor and the congregation.

Whatever the cause, it becomes the occasion when pastor and congregation find they must say goodbye.

#### 1. Saying Goodbye to Accept a Call a Distance Away

When a pastor accepts a call to a ministry a distance from the congregation which she or he is leaving, the opportunity for contact with members of the former congregation is quite limited, often non-existent. However, there frequently arise certain circumstances which pose questions for the departing pastor as to what is appropriate and what can be most helpful to the congregation and the interim and following pastors. **It is always incumbent upon the departing pastor to make sure that parishioners know that her or his relationship with the congregation will come to an end.** It is important that parishioners understand that this change of relationship is necessary in order that the congregation be free, in all respects, to make the adjustments necessary for changes of leadership, interim and permanent, without the departing pastor's influence. (See Section B, "Responsibilities in Saying Goodbye," below.)

## 2. Saying Goodbye but Remaining a Neighbor

When a pastor says goodbye and remains nearby, there are particularly sensitive aspects of separation which require careful attention on the part of the departing pastor.

The experience of pastors and congregations over the years has led many to believe that when a pastor ends a ministry with a congregation, it is best for the pastor to move out of the community. However, this is not always possible or advisable. **Thus, it is particularly important when a departing pastor remains in the community and in proximity to the former congregation, that he or she, with care and forethought, pay particular attention to what is said below with reference to a departing pastor's responsibilities to the congregation, individual members of the congregation, and to the interim and subsequent installed pastors.** (See Section B below, "Responsibilities of Saying Goodbye.")

**The departing pastor should not be a part of the worshipping or fellowship life of the congregation except upon the initiative and invitation of the interim or installed pastor. If such an invitation is extended, normally, it should not occur until the interim or next installed pastor has had the opportunity to establish relationships with the congregation.**

A retiring pastor who remains in the proximity of the congregation from which he or she has retired, will need to give careful consideration to the responsibilities that follow below

## 3. When One is Elected Pastor Emeritus

When a pastor retires, the congregation may bestow upon him or her the title of Pastor Emeritus. The provision for this is found in the *Book of Order* as follows:

When any pastor or associate pastor retires, and the congregation is moved by affection and gratitude to continue an association in an honorary relationship, it may, at a regularly called congregational meeting, elect him or her as pastor emeritus or emerita, with or without honorarium, but *with no pastoral authority or duty*. This action shall be taken *only after consultation with the committee on ministry of the presbytery concerning the wisdom of this relationship for the peace of the church*. This action shall be subject to the approval of presbytery, and may take effect upon the formal dissolution of the pastoral or associate pastoral relationship or anytime thereafter. (*Book of Order, G-14.0605*. Emphasis added)

To elect one as pastor or associate pastor emeritus is:

- ✦ evidence of a long and loving, mutually caring pastoral relationship;
- 2.

- ✦ a congregation's way of saying to the church-at-large and to the world that they love this person and are thankful for his or her time with them; and,
- ✦ a gift to the retired pastor which says something special to him or her.

**However, the pastoral relationship has been dissolved. The relationship of pastor to the people has ended and there is no expectation of the person to be present with the congregation because of the election.**

**All expectations related to the former pastor of a congregation apply to a pastor emeritus. (See below, "Responsibilities in Saying Goodbye.")**

## **B. RESPONSIBILITIES IN SAYING GOODBYE**

This paper speaks of "Separation Ethics." The use of the term "ethics" implies certain values which are important to consider during this often highly charged experience of the dissolution of the pastoral relationship. Such values include:

- ✦ effective leadership;
- ✦ congregational health and stability;
- ✦ the growth of pastor and members in dealing with the pain, the problems and the possibilities of separation; and,
- ✦ the ability of the session and congregation to move positively and effectively toward the next phase of their life together.

These values instruct the conduct and responsibilities of both the pastor and the congregation regarding their separation.

The material which follows is addressed to pastor, session, and congregation as appropriate, and finally, the Committee on Ministry of the presbytery. **However, the pastor is the one in the professional leadership role and, therefore, the one who has responsibility for making sure that the separation that occurs is anticipated and carried through with foresight and effectiveness.**

### **1. Responsibilities of the Departing Pastor**

Because of the sensitivity of the pastoral relationship, it is important that the departing pastor, in **any** dissolution, assume certain responsibilities to the former congregations, to the remaining staff and personnel of the church, to individual members of that congregation, and to the interim and next installed pastors.

#### **a. To the Congregation**

When the date has been set for the dissolution of the pastoral relationship, the departing pastor must take the lead in beginning to prepare the congregation for their separation. Certain things will need to be communicated clearly to the congregation in order to avoid confusion on the part of members in the days ahead.

This communication can be accomplished in several ways. A letter could be addressed to the members of the congregation spelling out clearly the matters below which are part of the separation and the time that follows.<sup>1</sup> A sermon might contain references to the approaching separation and speak to these matters. In casual conversation one-on-one or in groups, in public presence, in newsletters, in all contacts with people of the congregation, it is important that these matters be communicated and every effort made to have them understood. These matters are:

- 1) that all pastoral and professional relationships and responsibilities of the pastor with the congregation will end as of the effective date of the dissolution;
- 2) that the pastor will not be involved in any way in the selection process of either the interim pastor or the next installed pastor. Neither will he or she be involved in any way with the selection of any search team or pastor nominating committee;
- 3) that the pastor, after leaving, will not become engaged in conversations with church members or staff which, in any way, offer opinions or criticism about the life of the congregation or the performance of the interim or any subsequent installed pastors.
- 4) that any desire on the part of members of the congregation for the departing pastor to participate in congregational life or services should be discussed not with the departing pastor, but with the interim pastor or subsequent installed pastors;
- 5) that the departing pastor may participate in a wedding, a funeral, or a baptism of the congregation after the date of dissolution, only by invitation of the interim pastor or installed pastor, who shall be the officiant.

#### **b. To Individual Members of the Congregation**

It is important that, with particular friends, it be made clear that the pastoral relationship will come to an end. This does not mean that friendships must come

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<sup>1</sup> "Leaving the Pastorate: Staying in Town" by Rod Reinecke, in *Saying Goodbye, A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors*, an Alban Institute Publication by Edward A. White.

to an end. Friendships are priceless and are to be preserved, but there is a special responsibility on the part of the departing pastor to prevent friendships from becoming confused with the pastoral relationship. The pastoral functions of counseling, calling, conducting weddings, funerals, or baptisms are not appropriate. Neither is the rendering of opinions or judgments about the ministry of the former church or its pastor.<sup>2</sup> **It is the departing pastor's responsibility to see that this really happens.**

If the former pastor receives a request to return to the congregation for a particular occasion, it is important for her or him to remind those making the request that the present pastor is the one to whom the request should be made.

In any social context, where the former pastor is with friends or other members of the former congregation, it is the responsibility of the former pastor to be sure that he or she voices no criticism or evaluative comments about the new leadership of the congregation. It is not appropriate for the former pastor to comment on the "state of the congregation" or to be involved in any way in the selection of a successor, once she or he has departed.

**c. To the Remaining Staff and Personnel of the Church**

The former pastor has a responsibility to the remaining staff and personnel of the church at least in the following ways: 1) to prepare them for the separation that will occur; 2) to encourage them to receive and welcome the interim pastor and next installed pastor and be prepared to alter working patterns and relationships as may be needed; and, 3) to make clear that he or she will not be available for counsel or advice regarding the life and work of the church.

**d. To the Interim and Subsequent Installed Pastors**

The former pastor has a responsibility to the interim pastor and to subsequent installed pastors to make sure that any requests that come to him or her for services in the former congregation be redirected by the requesters to the interim pastor or installed pastor.

It is important that, when any request comes to the former pastor, she or he be in touch with the current pastor to let it be known what contacts have been made with him or her. This is a courtesy which is important to be extended to the current pastor. There should be no pastoral functions of any kind performed by the former pastor without the prior invitation or request of the current pastor.

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<sup>2</sup> "My Friend, the Former Pastor" by Joan Mabon, in *Saying Goodbye, A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors*, an Alban Institute Publication by Edward A. White

Should any community non-church function call the former pastor back into the community for public appearance of whatever nature, as a courtesy, the former pastor should inform the current pastor of the fact and the nature of the occasion.

## **2. Responsibilities of the Session**

### **a. To the Departing Pastor**

Following the pastor's decision to request dissolution of the pastoral relationship, the session can give support and encouragement to the pastor in the implementation of the decision. This can be done by assisting the pastor in interpreting the meaning of the end of the pastoral relationship to the congregation and, if need be, to the wider community.

As a caring expression of closure, it is appropriate for the session to arrange for an occasion when the congregation and pastor may formally say goodbye.

### **b. To the Congregation**

The session will want to be sensitive to the feeling of loss experienced by members of the congregation while demonstrating through their actions the meaning of the end of the pastoral relationship

Additional session leadership may be needed in the transition period so that worship, congregational life, and fellowship may continue.

The session can help the members of the congregation by encouraging them to see this time as an opportunity for growth and change. It can be a time for listening to individuals and groups in the congregation. It can be a time for examining present life, ministry, and service, and to be open to new possibilities. It is important that the congregation be prepared for change and for new pastoral leadership.

With the help of the Committee on Ministry, the session should interpret the role of the Committee on Ministry of the presbytery during the transition period. This will involve the naming of a session moderator, the process of obtaining an interim pastor, and the process of calling an installed pastor.

## **3. Responsibilities of the Committee on Ministry**

### **a. To the Departing Pastor**

Upon learning of the pastor's intention to retire or resign, a representative of the Committee on Ministry shall meet with the pastor to discuss these guidelines.

### **b. To the Session and Congregation**

Committee on Ministry representative(s) are available to be present at the meeting of the session when the pastor announces his or her resignation. The meeting shall include informing the session fully of these guidelines and orienting the session to the process of seeking pastoral leadership following the departure of the present pastor.

A representative of the Committee on Ministry shall be present at the meeting of the congregation when the pastor requests concurrence in her or his plans to leave, to inform the congregation of the process for obtaining subsequent pastoral leadership.

When a congregation plans to elect a retiring pastor as Pastor Emeritus, the material in II.A.3 on page 4, concerning the meaning of “Pastor Emeritus,” will be sent to the congregation and a representative of the Committee on Ministry will be offered to interpret the statement if that is desired.

**c. To the Interim and Next Installed Pastor**

It will be important for the Committee on Ministry to review these guidelines with the interim pastor and the next installed pastor and to be available for counsel should any difficulties arise regarding relationships with the former pastor.

**C. GUIDELINES FOR PASTORS RESIGNING THEIR POSITION**

**1. WHEN SHOULD I ANNOUNCE MY RESIGNATION?**

Resignation occurs when a pastor is moving his/her ministry to another location or a different form of ministry. Under normal conditions for leaving a parish, four to six weeks’ notice is adequate. This will allow sufficient time for tying up loose ends and for saying goodbye.

Giving notice of more than six weeks can make for an inordinately long period for everyone concerned having to hold onto grief feelings prior to the final termination, not unlike a prolonged period between a death and the funeral or memorial service. However, too short a time between the announcement and the departure is unfair to all affected, but especially to the congregation. The time after a pastor has announced his/her intention to move is a period of extremely important pastoral care: that which is extended by the departing pastor to the congregation and its members, and that which is extended by the congregation to the departing pastor and family.

A minister anticipating a move would do well to read the Alban Institute monograph, Running Through the Thistles by Roy Oswald, copies of which are available in the Presbytery’s Resource Center.

**2. WHOM SHOULD I TELL, WHEN, AND IN WHAT ORDER?**



- a) You should promptly notify the Stated Clerk or Executive Presbyter and the Chair of the Committee on Ministry of your intention to resign. They shall maintain confidentiality and will assist/advise in whatever ways are needed.
- b) Share the news with your Session before sharing it with others in your church or community. Ask them to call a Congregational Meeting to concur with your resignation.
- c) The pastor should announce his/her resignation officially and personally at a public worship service. Be positive and open in your announcement.
- d) The *Book of Order* requires that you notify the Committee on Ministry and/or the Office of the Presbytery in writing of your resignation and the congregational action concurring with your request (G-14.0602).
- e) The pastor must receive concurrence from the Committee on Ministry before moving from the parish.
- f) It is the pastor's responsibility to see that his/her congregation understands that he/she will no longer be their pastor. He/She needs to make it very clear to them that he/she is no longer available to preach or perform any pastoral task for them.
- g) The pastor who is leaving needs to be supportive of the Presbytery's pastor search process and encourage the congregation to work closely with the Presbytery during their search for a new pastor. As soon as possible, the Committee on Ministry will appoint one of its members to be a liaison to the church during the vacancy, as well as designating another minister as moderator of the Session. If possible, the Sunday after your last Sunday in the pulpit, a representative of Presbytery will be present to declare the pulpit vacant and preach and read the brief statement on separation ethics. (See **Statement of Ethics for Departing Pastors** on page 12.)
- h) All files and records of the church should be put in order and left intact so that the successor may easily find necessary records and equipment.
- i) When a pastor leaves a parish where he/she has served, he/she should affirm the good that has been accomplished. **DO NOT LEAVE ON A NEGATIVE NOTE.**

**D. GUIDELINES FOR RETIRING PASTORS.**

The Board of Pensions suggests that the process of retiring begin six to nine months before the anticipated date of retirement, and so six months notice to the congregation would be appropriate.

Ministers anticipating retirement should request the booklet, Information for Members Planning to Retire, from the Board of Pensions. Up to five years before retirement, you

should send a request for a pension quote to the Board of Pensions, as well as a request for Social Security benefits quote to the local Social Security office.

Presbytery must certify retirement to the Board of Pensions, taking such action at one of the stated meetings. Prior to Presbytery action, the Committee on Ministry will consider the application for retirement. Allow enough time to assure the application can be acted on in a timely manner. The Board of Pensions suggests requesting a retirement application at least ninety days prior to retirement, but a longer time may be wiser. Also, if you elect one of the joint survivor options, the appropriate form must be submitted to the Board at least three months prior to the retirement date.

Six to nine months before the anticipated retirement date, you should contact the local Social Security office to begin the application process for benefits.

**E. GUIDELINES FOR RETIRING PASTORS AND SPOUSES WHO REMAIN IN THE AREA AFTER LEAVING A PASTORATE**

1. A former pastor who chooses to remain in or return to the area in which he/she has served as pastor needs to deal realistically with his/her own needs for fellowship and church life apart from the former congregation.
2. You and your spouse can be most helpful to your successor and family being accepted in their new situation. You and your family can also be the most difficult problem your successor and family must face. Be sensitive to them, help them any way you can.
3. A former pastor should refrain from pastoral functions and not accept any position of leadership in his/her former church, nor attend meetings of the Session, Deacons, or Trustees unless invited by the Session and the Moderator of Session.
4. A former pastor should not officiate at any sacraments, weddings, funerals, or other functions involving members of his/her former church, or within its properties, unless invited by the Session and Moderator of Session. (OG-14.0606; W-1.4004 – 1.4006; G-10.0102c)
5. An invitation to officiate or perform pastoral functions in a former parish is an opportunity to demonstrate your support and loyalty to your successor. Offer to assist rather than officiate. Avoid any functions or requests which will isolate or exclude your successor from the people God has called him/her to serve.
6. A former pastor should avoid formal or informal participation in or comment on the work of the Pastor Nominating Committee.
7. If there are options for church membership and participation in another congregation, it is recommended that the former pastor and his/her family become

active in the work and worship of another congregation. Remaining in the same congregation can lead to tensions and difficulties, which no one intends, but which may not be avoidable.

8. To facilitate the transition, by the date of dissolution, the pastor should remove all of his/her personal items from the church and manse (if one is provided). This includes books, apparel, and papers/files. Any keys to the church or property should be given to the person/committee designated by the Session to handle church property.
9. Arrangements for payment of any monies due to the pastor (salary, annuities, expenses, etc.) or repayment of any monies owed the church by the pastor shall be made by the effective date of dissolution.
10. The new pastor can do much to prevent difficulties arising because of the presence of a 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. The new pastor should refrain from an criticism of the former pastor. This is a time for the possibility of new life and vitality in the church.

### **III. SUMMARY**

These guidelines are intended to serve as a help to pastors and churches as they go through difficult times of adjustment. They are provided as an attempt to avoid having a long and devoted pastoral relationship between a pastor and church become a source of dissension within a congregation and a source of pain for a succeeding pastor and family. The Committee on Ministry is available to counsel pastors, their families, and congregations regarding these guidelines as needed in their particular situations. If you have questions, please contact the Chair of the Committee on Ministry.

The Committee on Ministry always stand ready to talk with pastors and/or their spouses during and after the retirement process. Sympathetic and helpful assistance will be provided as the newly retired make adjustments to new life experiences, new goals, friendships and opportunities for service. It is important that all clergy and clerks of sessions be aware of this policy. As there may be changes in the make up of the Presbytery, we recommend the policy be sent out annually.

## STATEMENT OF ETHICS FOR DEPARTING PASTORS

To be read from the pulpit at the dissolution of a pastorate, or other pastoral relationship, and published for distribution to active membership:

**When a pastor leaves a charged, there are bonds of affection between the minister and members of the church which continue to be cherished. Relations of friendship continue, but the pastoral relationship does not. In order to spare minister and church members from embarrassment, and to encourage the new pastoral relationship that will be established, the Presbytery directs that the church be reminded of these requirements:**

*“When any minister resigns from a pastorate or retires from service, or becomes a pastor emeritus, the minister should cease to perform such functions of a pastor as funerals, baptisms and weddings, unless invited to officiate in such capacity by the pastor or by the moderator of vacant churches. (GA. Min. 1948, p. 119, Status of Retired Ministers)*

*“The spirit of this action applies to all ministers, whether retired or not, and whether they have ever served as pastors of particular churches.” (GA. Min. 1959, p. 208, Overture 39)*

***In short, church members should not request a former pastor to perform pastoral duties. If requested, the pastor should tactfully decline.***

