



Policy of Pastoral Ethics and Covenant of Departure for Retiring Pastors

This policy on pastoral ethics and Covenant of Departure is shared for the sake of the Church and the ongoing ministry of the congregation, to enable us to act wisely in difficult circumstances. It is provided to help rostered leaders and congregations understand S14.19 of the Synod Constitution: ***Ministers of Word and Sacrament shall respect the integrity of the ministry of congregations which they do not serve and shall not exercise ministerial functions therein unless invited to do so by the pastor, or if there is no duly called pastor, then by the interim pastor in consultation with the Congregation Council.***

[Approved by Synod Council, March 2021]

Guidelines for Congregation and Retiring Pastors

When a pastor is called to serve a congregation, or to leave a congregation to accept a new call or retire, we profess that the Holy Spirit is acting in this process. When we speak of a “call,” we believe that the Holy Spirit is at work guiding both the pastor and the congregation.

A healthy relationship between a pastor and the congregation is often mutually enriching and joyous. While serving a congregation, a pastor is often deeply involved in the lives of congregation, and it is appropriate that strong bonds of trust, friendship, commitment and interdependence develop.

However, when the Holy Spirit leads the pastor to a new call or into retirement, those relationships, however strong, must change for the future health of both the congregation and the pastor. For the congregation to move forward, its members need to accept fully the authority and guidance of succeeding pastors, both interim and called, even as they cherish the memory and leadership of the former pastor. For former pastors to live into their new lives of service or retirement, they need to surrender pastoral authority and sever pastoral ties with their former congregations and their people.

The following expectations will help clarify the new relationship between former pastors and congregations:

Congregations and Members:

- Will not reach out to former pastors for professional pastoral care in times of emotional, spiritual, or physical need, but rather exclusively to their current pastor.
- Will not invite or approach former pastors to perform or participate in pastoral acts, such as weddings, funerals, baptisms, home communions, etc.
- Will not seek the counsel of former pastors (or their family members) on matters relating to the congregation, including its worship life, finance, administration, leadership, or issues. Members will avoid talking with former pastors (and family members) about congregational matters.
- Will not expect former pastors (or their family members) to retain membership in the church, to attend worship, or to participate in activities or events in the life of the congregation.
- Will speak positively of former pastors (and their family members). As Martin Luther explains in the *Small Catechism*, the Eighth Commandment compels us to do so: “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defense, speak well of them and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.”
- Will, in continuing personal relationships, regard former pastors as friends only. Although it is common to address any ordained minister as “pastor,” in light of the new relationship members will remember that the former leader is no longer serving as *their* pastor.



Retiring Pastors:

- Whenever possible, will plan their retirement so that they will not be retiring in the parish where they have served as pastor.
 - If they are seriously considering remaining in the same community, please consult with the Bishop before any firm decisions are made.
 - Consider retirement as a “call to the ministry of the baptized.” Retirement does not mean being uninvolved as an active church member; it means to be involved in ministry as we have encouraged members to be involved throughout our ministries. Belonging to the same congregation that they served as pastor may not allow them to function actively, sharing their many gifts and insights, without creating problems for the congregation, which now has a covenant with a new pastor. Therefore, if there is any other ELCA congregation within commuting distance, they should transfer.
- Will politely but firmly refuse requests to provide ministerial care to former congregational members, instead referring them to the current pastor. For the health of the congregation and the integrity of the ministry of the current pastor, this rule will be without exception.
- Will politely but firmly refuse all requests to perform or participate in pastoral acts, such as weddings, funerals, baptisms, home communions, etc., instead referring them to the current pastor. (Former pastors will respond to all such requests with an unequivocal “no” and not suggest that members ask the current pastor if it is okay. Such a request puts the current pastor in a very difficult position, creates an unhealthy triangle, and can set a dangerous precedent.)
- Will decline to comment on matters relating to the former congregation, including worship life, finance, administration, interpersonal relationships, conflicts, or politics. Former pastors will counsel their family members similarly to decline. It is wise for former pastors to discourage members even from talking with them about congregational affairs.
- If possible, should move the official membership for themselves and all family members to another congregation. If possible, retiring pastors and family members will refrain from attending worship or participating in regular events and activities in the life of the congregation.
- Will speak well of the former congregation, its leaders, and its members. As Martin Luther explains in the *Small Catechism*, the Eighth Commandment instructs us to do so: “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray, or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.”
- Will, in continuing personal relationships, regard members of the former congregation as friends only. In light of this new relationship, former pastors will encourage former congregation members to address them by their given name. When they are addressed with the honorific of “Pastor,” ministers will remind, as appropriate, former members that they no longer serve as *their* pastor.
- While the above statements are addressed to pastors, **spouses of pastors** must consider the same factors, and also respect the above recommendations. Spouses share a pastoral identity and, as a result, can become hindrances as easily as a pastor can.
- It is your responsibility as a former pastor to be supportive of your successor, even when that is difficult to do. If it is not possible to be supportive of the pastor’s ministry, it is extremely important that you remove yourself from that congregation, in order to not become a hindrance to its ministry.



Covenant of Departure

In order to promote a healthy closure to the ministry tenure of our departing pastor and a healthy beginning to the tenure of successor pastors, we the undersigned agree to do our best to abide by the conditions of this covenant. We will encourage others in our congregation and our families to do the same by making this covenant a public and living document.

Signature: _____ Date _____
Congregation Council President

Signature: _____ Date _____
Retiring Pastor

Adopted by
Date: