

**Separation Ethics**  
**(When Pastor and Congregation say Good-bye)**  
**(Revised as of April 2026)**

**Definitions**

A former pastor is one who no longer serves as pastor, associate pastor, co-pastor, commissioned pastor, or in any temporary pastoral relationship for the congregation.

A current pastor is one who currently serves as pastor, associate pastor, or co-pastor for the congregation, this includes commissioned pastors that are not serving as an interim pastor.

An interim pastor is a pastor serving on a temporary basis as pastor, associate pastor, co-pastor, or in any temporary pastoral relationship for the congregation.

**Purpose**

Pastoral transitions represent key milestones in the lives of the former pastor, the congregation, and the new pastor. Extreme care must be taken to ensure these transitions are as successful as possible for everyone involved. The Commission on Ministry affirms the unique nature of the relationships among a pastor, the pastor's family, and the congregation.

Because the pastoral relationship is very important, often deeply personal, and, in some cases, life saving to people in the congregation, the dissolution of any pastoral relationship can become a highly charged emotional event. The separation ethics described herein seek to promote the peace and unity of the church, congregational health, the ability of the session to move the congregation positively forward, the growth of both the former pastor and the new pastor, and to address issues that the members have in dealing with the pain, problems, and possibilities of separation.

This policy operates to provide the incoming pastor and the congregation with the appropriate opportunity to establish healthy new pastoral relationships. It should also allow a former pastor who is retiring to be able to actually retire and a former pastor that is taking on a different responsibility to devote his/her full energy to that responsibility. With all of the above in mind, this policy sets forth some unique requirements for behavior that must be adopted by everyone involved.

## **The Former Pastor**

To the extent that these provisions are not subject to exceptions subsequently set forth, the former pastor must guard against perpetuating close ties with the congregation. The former pastor shall apply these ethical considerations to all social media and email communications as well as personal contacts. It is the responsibility of the former pastor to see to it that all members of the congregation know that her/his relationship with the congregation will come to an end. The former pastor shall personally and publicly announce that she/he will no longer be available for pastoral services following the stated date of departure.

The former pastor shall fulfill that announced intention by declining all requests from members of the congregation for pastoral services that are to occur after the announced date of departure. It is particularly important for the former pastor to be the one to say no when asked to perform duties of a pastor, such as participation in a baptism, wedding, or funeral at the church or for a member of the congregation.

If contacted by a church member, the former pastor shall encourage the church member to depend on the interim or current pastor for pastoral care as well as decline the request. Immediately following the contact, the former pastor shall notify the current pastor of the contact and the need for pastoral care.

If the former pastor is retired and maintains residence in the community, he/she should seek a church home in another congregation. The former pastor shall not be a part of the worshiping or fellowship life of the congregation except as subsequently provided for herein.

The former pastor shall not be involved, in any way, in the selection process of a new pastor or interim pastor nor become engaged in conversations with church members or church staff which offer opinions or criticism about the life of the congregation or the performance of the current pastor.

Former pastors who are elected pastor emeritus are reminded that this is an honorary title and carries no job responsibilities or privileges.

Former pastors are still under the obligation of the presbytery, including all rules, procedures, and guidelines, as long as they remain members of a presbytery.

## **The Session**

The session can assist the former pastor in interpreting the meaning of the end of a pastoral relationship to the congregation. It is appropriate for the session to arrange for an occasion when the congregation and former pastor may formally say good-bye. The session will want to be sensitive to the feeling of loss experienced by members of the congregation while demonstrating through its actions the meaning of the end of the pastoral relationship. The session can help the members by encouraging them to see this as an opportunity for growth. This can be a time of listening to individuals and groups as well as a time for examining the present and future life and ministry of the church.

The session should provide a statement on the church's website, in the bulletin, and other appropriate places explaining the separation process to members, notifying members of the time and place of the formal good-bye gathering, and reminding the members that their pastoral needs will continue to be met by the remaining staff.

The session should refrain from being critical of the former pastor or of other church members to the current pastor.

The session may consider issues with a clergy couple where one remains on staff and situations where adult members of the former pastor's family wish to remain members or employees of the congregation. Resolution of such issues may be included in the Covenant of Closure agreement and may create exceptions to certain provisions. All such exceptions must be approved by the Commission on Ministry.

## **Members of the Congregation**

Members of the congregation should remember that no matter how much they are attached to their former pastor, that person is no longer their pastor. Any desire on the part of members to have the former pastor participate in congregational life or services should be discussed with the current pastor, not with the former pastor.

This does not mean that friendships must come to an end. Members of the congregations and former pastors alike should realize that there is a difference between pastoral ties and personal friendships. Personal friendships, unconnected to pastoral duties, remain and are encouraged.

## **The Current Pastor**

The current pastor is the pastor for the congregation and should fulfill this responsibility as she/he deems necessary. While performing the duties his or her way, the current pastor should refrain from any criticism of the former pastor.

The current pastor can do much to prevent difficulties arising because of the presence of the former pastor. The current 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 current pastor should recognize that the congregation's affection for the former pastor as an individual does not prevent the development of bonds with the current pastor.

The current pastor shall notify the Commission on Ministry if a situation develops involving the former pastor that the current pastor believes has potential of causing disruption.

## **Return of the Former Pastor to the Worship and Life of the Congregation**

The former pastor shall not be a part of the worshiping or fellowship life of the congregation except upon the initiative and invitation of the moderator of the session. If such an invitation is extended, it should not occur until the current pastor has had an opportunity to establish relationships with the congregation. This is usually a minimum of one year from the time the current pastor is installed (if called) or hired but may be longer or shorter based upon the particular circumstances. The moderator of the session may consider that the longer the former pastor served, the longer the separation period may need to be as well as the availability of alternative reformed churches in the area.

The moderator of the session should remember that extending an invitation to the former pastor to be involved in the life and work of the church may not be in the best interest of the church or the current pastor.

The moderator of the session should consider any such decision very carefully and should consult the session and the Moderator of the Commission on Ministry to gain consensus on the appropriate degree of involvement, if any, the former pastor should have and when such should occur.

## **The Former Pastor Performing Pastoral Services For Members of the Congregation or During the Worships Services.**

Members should not call on the former pastor for any pastoral services. Instead they should confer with the interim or current pastor regarding such a request. It should be expected that such requests will be denied within the first year of a current pastor's ministry. Members should understand that any invitation to share in such services anytime after the former pastor leaves must be made by the moderator of the session, who should consult with and obtain the approval of the session and the Moderator of the Commission on Ministry prior to making such an invitation.

In special situations, a former pastor may be called upon to perform pastoral services upon the invitation of the moderator of the session, who should consult with and obtain the approval of the session and the Moderator of Commission on Ministry prior to making such an invitation. The former pastor would conduct such services as the interim or current pastor requests and under his/her direction.

When a church is without pastoral leadership (no installed or temporary pastor or commissioned pastor) or where a small congregation has an unusual situation, a former pastor may perform pastoral duties such as baptisms, weddings, or funerals at the request of the moderator of the session and with the concurrence of the Moderator of the Commission on Ministry.

### **Conclusion**

The session and the (soon to be) former pastor shall enter into the Covenant of Closure agreement in substantial conformity with the form attached.

COVENANT OF CLOSURE  
The Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley

The Rev. \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_  
Presbyterian Church, in consultation with the Commission on Ministry of the  
Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley, having discussed the intent and requirements  
of the Separation Ethics policy regarding former pastors enter into the following  
covenant, effective as of the date of the dissolution of the pastoral relationship as set  
forth below.

1. I, the Rev. \_\_\_\_\_ acknowledge that  
I have read the “Separation Ethics” document and that a complete copy is attached to  
my copy of this agreement.

2. I, Rev. \_\_\_\_\_ agree, as to  
\_\_\_\_\_ Presbyterian Church and its congregation:

(a) not to become involved in any leadership or advisory role (public or private);

(b) not to intervene, support, or give advice to anyone involved in a congregational  
disagreement or dispute;

(c) not to officiate in any special events in the lives of members of the congregation,  
including weddings, funerals, baptisms, worship leadership, or other church activities,  
unless expressly invited by the moderator of the session;

(d) to refuse requests for pastoral services made by members of the congregation and  
to refer such requests to the current pastor or interim pastor;

(e) to attend another congregation and be involved in the life of that other  
congregation until I am invited to attend worship services and be involved in the life  
of the congregation by the moderator of the session.

(f) to consult with the moderator of the session prior to attending a special event of  
a member of the congregation as a friend or family member would normally do, as the  
event entails (with no official role), and to attend with the permission of the  
moderator of the session;

(g) to refrain from giving opinions or directions regarding church business of my  
former congregation;

(h) to explain and affirm the above principles to the congregation in writing (by letter, newsletter, or by electronic publications) and personally, from the pulpit, before departing.

It is understood that this agreement does not affect or require termination of friendships with individuals in the congregation.

3. The Session of \_\_\_\_\_ Presbyterian Church agrees:

(a) to publish a summary of the Separation Ethics on the church website, in written communication, and/or in electronic communications designed to explain the separation procedures to the entire congregation.

(b) to interpret and explain the terms of the Covenant of Closure and the Separation Ethics to individual members of the congregation where a more detailed explanation is needed (such as they have made a request and do not want to take “no” for an answer);

(c) to incorporate this agreement in the minutes of the session;

(d) to include the summary of the Separation Ethics published to the congregation in the minutes of the congregational meeting that approved the separation;

(e) to schedule and provide a formal good-bye gathering so that members of the congregation may say good bye to the (soon to be) former pastor.

With session approval, this agreement is made and entered into on the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ in the year of our Lord two thousand and \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Pastor/Associate Pastor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Clerk of Session

\_\_\_\_\_  
Moderator of Commission on Ministry

\*Where exceptions to the usual terms have been made an addendum is attached.  
\_\_\_\_\_ attachments, \_\_\_\_\_ pages.