
Resource B

The Ethics of Pastoral Transition

Congregations and pastors need to understand the professional ethics of ministry relating to former pastors, interim pastors, current pastors and retired pastors. A pastor who resigns or retires from a congregational ministry setting no longer serves as pastor to members of this congregation. Former pastors should not agree to pastoral responsibilities that rightfully belong to the current pastor of the congregation.

The PURPOSE of this paper is to clearly state the proper boundaries for former pastors, interim pastors, retired pastors, current pastors, and members of congregations relative to on-going pastoral responsibilities and duties.

Former Pastors

If a former pastor is asked to officiate at a special service by members, he/she should respond immediately by saying: “Thank you very much for asking me, but it is simply NOT appropriate for me to do that since I am no longer your pastor.” The former pastor then encourages them to call their present pastor.

It is very natural that members turn again to a former pastor who perhaps baptized their other children or performed other weddings and funerals for family members while serving as the family’s pastor. Again, with great sensitivity and love, the former pastor should graciously decline and direct the family to their current pastor. As with other family friends, the former pastor might attend the service as a guest.

Former pastors should avoid the comment to members, “You’ll need to speak first to your present pastor about me doing this.” Such a comment places the current pastor in the very awkward situation of having to relinquish the pastoral role to the former pastor or saying no to the members’ request and thus appearing insensitive, uncaring or insecure.

Former pastors who retire need to promptly transfer their membership to another Lutheran congregation where they can become involved as a retired pastor. This is also a great gift to the congregation formerly served.

Please note this section of the Synod’s Constitution, that is consistent in every Synod of the ELCA:

†S14.19. 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.

In this age of extensive social networking on-line in its many forms, former pastors need to be aware and sensitive about their on-line communications. Continuing to “copy” members of their former congregation in emails or Facebook interactions is a form of continuing pastoral interactions/relationships. On-line interactions are to be discontinued. Be sure to remove past parishioners from your batch email lists and Facebook access.

Interim Pastors

The interim pastor is the current pastor of the congregation until that time comes when the new pastor assumes the role of pastor and shepherd of the congregation. Whether part time or full time, the interim pastor should be contacted for all pastoral acts during the transition time. The former pastor should not be contacted by members to return to perform a pastoral responsibility during the transition.

Current Pastors

Current pastors should speak as positively as possible of the ministry of former pastors even though their style and vision might be very different. The current pastor should never feel pressured to relinquish his/her pastoral role to a former pastor. When a current pastor feels it is appropriate and healthy to invite a former pastor to return to participate in a special occasion, worship or activity, he/she can certainly extend such an invitation.

Retired Pastors Who Join a Congregation

Retired pastors who join congregations can be a blessing to the congregation. Retired pastors need to remember that they come with experience and gifts for ministry and may be asked to share such gifts at the invitation of the current pastor. Retired pastors need to be supportive of the current pastor. Should retired pastors have concerns about the current pastor or feel they are unable to be supportive of the current pastor, they are to call the bishop rather than to share their unsupportive viewpoints with the leadership or congregation. It is strongly suggested that retired pastors and their spouses do not serve on council.

Members & Friends of the Congregation

Members should avoid placing both the current and former pastors in awkward positions by seeking the pastoral services of a former pastor. Members should simply not ask for such favors from former pastors. By showing high regard to the current pastor, members affirm the significance of the pastoral office which was once held by the former pastor.

If the congregation, council or current pastor experience difficulties with proper boundaries being maintained, the bishop should be contacted.

Please copy this paper and distribute as appropriate.

Outgoing Pastor Must Sign Below

Return a signed copy to the Synod office tinaf@fbsynod.org and keep a copy for your records.

Print Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

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