

When A Pastor Leaves a Church

Separation Ethics

Rationale

The relationship between a pastor and congregation is often deeply personal, built on an accumulation of shared transitional and transformational times in personal and corporate lives. It has evolved through teaching, preaching, ordinances, weddings, funerals, presence in times of crisis, praying with and for members, counseling, and shared leadership. The pastor has encouraged people in worship, equipped them for tasks, helped bring forth gifts, and prepared them for mission. From these times, trust, confidence, admiration, affection, fondness, respect, and love have grown. When the relationship between a pastor and a congregation ends for any reason, it marks the beginning of a period of high emotions, uncertainty, and excitement for both the pastor and the congregation. In the months and years that follow, the congregation will evaluate its ministry and seek new leadership; this is a particularly important time in the life of the congregation, and it requires appropriate distance from the former pastor so that the congregation can embrace its future. Likewise, that time is important for the former pastor to embrace a new stage in his or her life whether that is retirement, a new call, a new vocation, or a period of Sabbath from the practice of ministry. When congregations and former pastors do not keep appropriate distance from each other, it impedes the ability of both to accept the guidance of the Holy Spirit in this new stage of their lives.

Impact on the Former Pastor

When congregations turn to a former pastor to preside at weddings, funerals, and baptisms or to provide counseling and instruction, it prevents the pastor from enjoying the respite he or she sought in retirement or time away from the practice of ministry. When the former pastor has accepted a new call, it robs the present to serve the past by stealing the pastor away from his or her current ministry. When there is a new pastor called to the congregation, the return of the former pastor can degrade the collegial relationship that they share as pastors. Furthermore, such requests can strain the good will between the former pastor and former congregation as he or she is forced to choose which requests to accept and which to decline.

Impact on the Current Pastor

Because the relationship between a pastor and congregation is built on the sharing of their lives and faith, when a congregation turns to a former pastor to provide those things which the current pastor is called to provide, it prevents that relationship from growing and sends the message that the current pastor is not really the pastor of the congregation. The involvement of the former pastor in the present life of the congregation can undermine the authority of the current pastor and degrade his or her relationship with the congregation.

Impact on the Congregation

In the period between pastors, the congregation has the opportunity to discover what God is calling it to be and do in the next chapter of its ministry. When a former pastor is involved in that process, either at the request of the congregation or by the former pastor's own initiative, he or she robs the congregation of the opportunity to move into that next stage of ministry. Once the congregation has called a new pastor, the first few years of that ministry are critically important because it is during that time that the relationship between the congregation and the pastor is established and the new direction of the congregation is set. The involvement of the former pastor during that time can prevent the relationship with the new pastor from being established, which can end the tenure of that pastor before it begins. The involvement of the former pastor during that time can also prevent the church from setting a new direction in ministry either out of respect for the former pastor and his or her leadership or because the former pastor does not agree with the new direction; this can be detrimental to the congregation as it decides to minister to its community as it was and not as it is.

Polity

Recognizing the difficulty that a continuing relationship between a former pastor and a former congregation can cause, the Minister's Council Covenant and Code of Ethics, ABCUSA stipulates the following:

I will, upon my resignation or retirement, sever my ministerial relations with my former constituents, and will not make ministerial contacts in the field of another ministerial leader without his/her request and/or consent.

Finally, when a former pastor is interfering in the life and work of a former congregation and its current pastor, it is the responsibility of the American Baptist Churches of Maine's Committee on the Ministry to uprightly administer ecclesiastical discipline through its ecclesiastical process remembering that discipline is "for building up the body of Christ, not for destroying it, for redeeming, not for punishing".

Pastors Emeritus and Local Church Associates

In the case where a healthy relationship between the congregation, current pastor, and former pastor exists, these designations may be helpful in recognizing and ordering that relationship. For these purposes, the Committee on the Ministry will understand these terms to mean:

Pastor Emeritus - a title given by the local church to a pastor who retired from service to that particular congregation. By nature, Pastors Emeriti are retired and are not expected to perform any pastoral functions because of this honorary designation. Pastors Emeritus are expected to abide by the standards for ethical separation.

When a local church desires to name a pastor emeritus, they should confer with the ABCOM Committee on the Ministry before proceeding.

Ethical Separation

The Committee on the Ministry recognizes that each congregation and pastor are different and so some flexibility in separation is required in order to encourage the health of the local church and its pastors. Therefore, the Committee on the Ministry suggests that separating pastors and congregations complete a ***Boundaries Covenant*** to order their lives after the call is dissolved. The ***Boundaries Covenant*** has some parts that are non-negotiable and some that will be negotiated by the local church and the departing pastor and then sent to the Committee on the Ministry. The ***Boundaries Covenant*** will be kept on file by the Committee on the Ministry secretary and will be given to any temporary or installed pastors who serve the congregation after that point for so long as it is relevant to the life and ministry of the local church.

Non-Negotiable

No Relationship with the Pastoral Search Committee – The former pastor shall not be involved in the call process for a new pastor in any way. This includes, but is not limited to, influencing the election of a potential pastoral search committee member, commenting on the search committee process, or making recommendations on particular candidates.

Compensation Ceases – The former pastor shall not continue to receive compensation from the congregation, whether salary, use of church property, or reimbursements except those negotiated as part of a severance agreement that has been approved by a congregational vote.

Officiate by Invitation Only – The former pastor will only provide pastoral services to members of their former congregations as invited to do so by the current moderator of the church and/or current chair of the diaconate. The moderator and/or diaconate chair may withdraw an invitation previously given by a past moderator and/or diaconate chair.

Discourage Membership Transfers – If the former pastor has taken a new call near the former congregation, he or she will not attempt to recruit members from the former congregation and will encourage any who inquire about moving their membership from the former congregation to the new one to remain committed to their current congregation.

Negotiable

Period of Separation – It is customary for a former pastor to observe a period of no contact with the congregation for a period of time after the call is dissolved. Ordinarily, this period lasts until 1 (one) year after a new pastor is installed.

Return for Pre-Arranged Services – Are there any impending services that will take place after the date of dissolution for which it has already been arranged for the pastor to preside? Is there someone else who can preside at these services instead?

Community Relations – A pastor is often seen as a pastor to people beyond the membership of the congregation. This may take on many forms whether it is presiding at weddings and funerals for non-members, participating in the leadership of local ministries, or providing counseling to members of the community at-large. To what extent were these activities because he or she was the pastor of the congregation and to what extent were they the personal projects of the pastor? Which of these activities will continue and which will end? Who needs to be told of these new boundaries (funeral directors, wedding planners, hospital chaplains, ministry boards, etc.) and how will they be informed?

Family – Are any of the pastor's family members also members of the congregation? Will they continue to be active in the life of the congregation? How will the congregation continue to provide support and care to them while also keeping appropriate distance from the former pastor? What considerations need to be made for and by the family as the congregation proceeds to call a new pastor?

Friendship – Just because the former pastor is no longer the pastor, does not mean that he or she does not have real and lasting friendships with members of the congregation. How will the line be drawn between being someone's pastor and being someone's friend?

Social Media – New forms of media have enabled new forms of ministry; they have also complicated separation ethic as pastors who have moved far away can more easily continue to provide pastoral services to members of their congregations using those means. To what extent have blogs, social media, text/instant messages, email and other electronic means been a part of the ministry of the pastor? What activities need to end? What needs to change to help the congregation turn away from their former pastor towards their new one?

Severance – When a pastor leaves a congregation there are some final compensation issues to be negotiated including the use of accrued vacation time, the disposition of church property (laptop, books, cell phone, vestments, etc.), the use of the parsonage beyond the date of dissolution, etc. In the event that the dissolution of the call was not initiated by the pastor, the local church will often require an agreement that includes the continuation of compensation for a defined period of time while the pastor seeks a new call.

To Whom These Standards Apply

Pastors – All former pastors who served in installed or temporary positions or are called interim pastors are expected to abide by the **Boundaries Covenant** out of respect for their call to be ethical in their deportment of ministry.

Congregations – Congregations are expected to abide by the **Boundaries Covenant** out of respect for their former pastor, his or her new call (or retirement), and the new pastor of the congregation, and the promises that the congregation made regarding that new pastor "to respect his or her call."

The American Baptist Churches of Maine – The ABCOM is expected to encourage all parties to live within the terms of the ***Boundaries Covenant*** as an extension of its responsibility for “implementing standards of recognition for ministerial leadership” and implementing ABCOM’s Ecclesiastical Process for Ministerial Review”.

While the Committee on the Ministry does not hold the expectation of a ***Boundaries Covenant*** for persons serving congregations in other capacities, (youth ministers, Christian Education Directors, organists, worship leaders, etc.), they commend it to congregations as a way to have a discussion about separation ethics when those individuals leave their employ.

Communicating These Standards to Congregations

It is best if multiple parties explain the standards for ethical separation to the congregation so that it can be fully understood and does not appear to come from only one source. After the departure of the pastor is announced, the local church will meet with their ABCOM staff member to talk about next steps and include separation ethics as part of that discussion with the congregation. It is also particularly important for the departing pastor to speak about separation ethics with the congregation. It is also particularly important for the departing pastor to speak about separation ethics with the congregation and to publicly share the contents of the ***Boundaries Covenant***.

On the pastor’s last Sunday, the Committee on the Ministry encourages the congregation to include a liturgical dismissal of the pastor that acknowledges his or her service to the congregation and the agreed upon separation ethics. An ABCOM representative is often present on the pastor’s last Sunday and will say a few words about separation ethics at that time; if a representative is unable to attend, a letter to the congregation will be sent instead.

Boundaries Covenant
American Baptist Churches of Maine

This covenant will order the future relationship between _____ (hereafter referred to as "the church" and _____ (hereafter referred to as "the Pastor") and the American Baptist Churches of Maine who understand and accept the terms of this covenant and commit themselves to abiding by them as a way of encouraging the health and ministry of both the pastor and the congregation when the pastoral relationship is dissolved as of _____.

As of the date above, the pastor and the church covenant together that:

- The pastor will cease all pastoral duties and will only perform pastoral services to the church at the invitation of the moderator and/or diaconate chair;
- The church will end compensation to the pastor except any negotiated severance;
- The pastor will not attempt to influence the search process for a new pastor;
- The pastor will not recruit members of the church to join him or her in his or her new call;
- Any future contact between the pastor and members of the church will be as friends and not as pastor and congregation.

Period of Separation:

Return for Pre-Arranged Services:

Community Relations:

Family:

Social Media:

Severance:

This covenant is made for celebrating the shared ministry of the pastor and the church as it draws to a close and for strengthening their separate ministries as they go their separate ways. May Christ use it for the building up of His Church and may all glory be given to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever, Amen.

In signing, the parties indicate a commitment to abide by the above covenant and that they have received, understand, and will abide by the separation ethics policy of the American Baptist Churches of Maine.

Pastor

Date

Moderator/Diaconate Chair

Date

Secretary, Committee on the Ministry

Date