

Pacific Northwest Conference of the United Church of Christ
Committee on Ministry

Clergy Concluding Pastorates Ethical Departure Guidelines

Adapted from *A Sure Foundation* produced by the MESA team of the UCC

(For all Authorized Ministerial relationships: installed, interim, specialized ministry, retired, conference staff, three or four way Covenants or other.)

Every ministry has a beginning and an end....

When pastors conclude their ministry in a setting, they depart in faith that Jesus' words from Matthew are true for them and for the congregations they depart: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." This allows departing pastors to take their leave, trusting God will continue to care for those whom the pastor has served. This trust in God is especially essential at the time of departure, when the impact of new boundaries becomes real and temptations to cross these boundaries increase.

These departure guidelines are meant to facilitate a faithful leave-taking on the part of the pastor, freeing the church or ministry setting the freedom to bond with the new minister called to live into a new future.

Boundaries and Best Practices Introduction

It is the expectation that, upon departure, a pastor will not return to serve that congregation or its congregants in a pastoral capacity. Historically this has been for a minimum of one to two years after a settled pastor has been called. However, best practice for the church and the new pastor, would be for the former pastor to return only when invited by the settled pastor. A departing pastor will observe a boundary of not initiating contact with congregants, thus helping congregants observe the same. This enables the pastor to fulfill their covenant with the UCC Ministerial Code ethical guidelines and supporting their former church's relationship-building with a new pastor. Re-establishing contact is only appropriate after negotiation with the new pastor, potentially in dialogue with the Committee on Ministry (COM).

A departing pastor develops a departure plan that is ethically aligned with the UCC Ministerial Code and fulfills COM requirements, and by which they covenant to abide. This plan is detailed to include the pastor's boundaries with the congregation, with the community, and in social media. It is to be communicated clearly to the congregation prior to departure, and may be repeated by a COM representative at a Farewell Service.

Expectations for Church Pastors

The departing Minister shall contact the COM for an exit interview.

Boundaries with the congregation:

- The departing pastor will leave with grace, expressing gratitude for the time shared, encouraging the congregation to rely on the new pastor for leadership and pastoral care.
- The pastor will clearly state they will no longer be available for pastoral care, weddings, baptisms, funerals, church activities, etc. On rare occasions the current pastor may invite the former pastor to participate.
- The pastor will say “goodbye” through an exit interview, a Farewell Service in worship, meeting with groups with whom they have ministered and then practice saying “hello” to their new ministry setting or to their new reality of retirement.
- In some cases a complete break is not possible, particularly as it relates to the minister’s family members or community activities. It is the minister’s responsibility to limit the interactions to the particular activity and refrain from any discussion of issues within the former church.

Boundaries with the community:

- The pastor will inform hospitals, nursing homes, and other care facilities that they will no longer be available for Bible study, worship services, or other pastoral duties following their departure date.
- The pastor will inform area funeral homes that they will no longer be available for funerals or memorial services for members of the congregation following their departure date. They will encourage funeral directors to direct requests to the new pastor of the congregation.
- When the pastor’s responsibilities have included specialized duties (Minister of Music or Minister of Social Justice, e.g.), the pastor will inform organizations with whom they have partnered in this role that they will no longer be available for this partnership, and encourage those settings to invite the incoming pastor’s participation.
- The pastor will inform other places of general community ministry (city council meetings, civic clubs, ecumenical groups, etc.) they will no longer be able to offer pastoral services (such as guest preaching, opening/closing prayers, musical leadership) following their departure date, and encourage those settings to invite the incoming pastor’s participation.
- It is recommended that the pastor resign from any area community board of director positions held by virtue of their position as a pastor in that community.

Boundaries with social media:

- Prior to departure, the pastor will transfer administrator duties for church-related social media spaces and accounts, remove their own administrator status, and share password information to someone else in the congregation who in turn changes the passwords and takes over administrator duties.
- Though difficult, it is recommended as a best practice for the departing pastor to unfriend/unfollow on social media, congregants with whom they've had a pastoral relationship. In this way, pastors prioritize the needs of the congregation and incoming ministerial leadership over their own desires to maintain relationships (or the desires of congregants to stay in contact). Pastors must be consistent with all congregants. They should convey this policy to their congregation as part of their departure plan so there is no confusion.
- Following the end date of their contract, call, or covenant with the congregation, pastors must refrain from providing pastoral care through digital communication. Continuing to provide pastoral care through social media interferes with the ministry of one's successor and is a violation of the UCC Ministerial Code.
- Following a period of 1-3 years following the call of the settled pastor, former pastors may discern whether they will begin to accept friend requests of former congregants. They should not initiate friend/follow requests with former congregants, and they must continue to refrain from providing pastoral care, or discuss church issues with former congregants.

Boundaries with the next ministry setting:

- The pastor focuses on getting to know the new ministry setting.
- If the pastor's new ministry is in another congregation, the pastor transfers their church membership and ministerial standing to the new congregation and Conference.
- If the pastor's new ministry is in a non-church setting (such as chaplaincy), the former pastor still changes their church membership. When such a change is not practical or possible, the former pastor still maintains a no-contact boundary with the congregation for 1-3 years after the new pastor has been installed, in discussion with the new pastor.
- If the pastor's new ministry potentially includes contact with their former congregation as an element of their new role (such as a judicatory position), then the new ministry setting, the COM, and the congregation negotiate ways to navigate this interaction appropriately. When possible, it is best for another staff person to offer appropriate leadership to the former congregation.
- Similarly, if the pastor's new ministry is with a congregation in the same Conference, the departed pastor and the new pastor are encouraged to have a conversation, facilitated by the COM, regarding boundaries. (Examples may include: if former congregants attend worship in the pastor's new congregation, the pastor encourages them to continue their relationship with the former congregation. When Conference events are held at the former

congregation, the former pastor and current pastor should discuss appropriate roles for the former pastors – including no role.)

- If the pastor’s new ministry includes a particular public platform (e.g. academic and publishing ministries), the departing pastor should seek wisdom from the COM or Conference Minister to mitigate the impact on the former congregation as best as possible.

EXPECTATIONS FOR MINISTERS IN SPECIALIZED SETTINGS

The departing Minister shall contact the COM for an exit interview.

When a minister departs or retires from a specialized ministry setting (one not based in a congregation, such as chaplaincy or academics), the boundaries outlined for Church Pastors are still held as best practices, although it is important to note several nuances:

Boundaries with ministry setting:

- Similar to a pastor departing from congregations, a minister departing from a specialized ministry will inform the setting that they will be unavailable for pastoral care, preaching, Bible study or lectures, and special services (funerals, weddings, baptisms, etc.).
- A minister who has served in a pastoral role should decline to discuss the state or events of their former ministry setting with all persons, instead encouraging others to speak with new leaders in the ministry setting.

Boundaries with community:

- The departing minister should not represent the ministry setting in any context following the departure date, e.g. a hospital chaplain may not represent their former employer at a health care conference or a retired denominational officer may not represent the denomination at an ecumenical gathering. Exceptions may be made if an invitation to such an event comes at the express invitation of the person currently in the role.
- In judicatory, academic and publishing ministries, in which the experience gained in a former ministry contributes to the public platform of the minister, the public presence of the departing minister can impede the next minister’s role. The wisdom of COM should be sought in determining how long an absence may be appropriate.

Boundaries in social media:

- The minister will adhere to all policies of their employer regarding social media boundaries.
- Prior to departure from a setting, a minister will pass along all administrator duties for ministry-related social media accounts and spaces, remove their own administrator status from those accounts, and share password information with someone who changes the passwords and takes over administrator duties.
- A minister must refrain from providing pastoral care or seeking out continued relationships through digital communication with those persons who were in the minister’s care.

- Regardless of exceptions that may be made and nuances that may be relevant to distinct ministries, boundaries for a minister's departure should be discussed with their Committee on Ministry so that it can support and hold accountable the minister during a season of change.

EXPECTATIONS FOR RETIRING CLERGY

The departing Minister shall contact the COM for an exit interview.

When a minister retires from a congregational or specialized ministry, the UCC Ministerial Code is still be adhered to and the boundaries outlined above are to be honored.

- A retired minister refrains from providing pastoral care or seeking out continued relationship with those formerly in their care, and transfers their church membership (and ministerial standing, if appropriate) upon retirement. These boundaries encourage the minister to build relationships with a new community and to acclimate to retirement.
- Even in instances and locations where retired clergy remain in the community they have served (including, at times, retaining church membership in their former congregations due to a lack of local UCC churches), a retired minister should not participate in the life of a congregation from which they have retired for a period of 1-3 years after arrival of the settled pastor. This boundary includes funerals, weddings, and baptisms for congregants and the wider community alike.
- If the retired minister desires to return to a former church following the required separation, this is determined in conversation with the current pastor and the Committee on Ministry. Utmost care and caution should be taken to avoid interference with the ministry and leadership of the current pastor. Former ministers should decline all major offices of the congregation.
- Any issues or improprieties between the returning minister and the current pastor would ideally be dealt with in conversation between the clergy and should not involve congregation members. Unresolved issues should be taken to the Committee on Ministry or the Conference Minister as soon as possible.
- When a pastor retires and is given the honorary title "Pastor Emeritus/Emerita," such a title is honorary and normally confers no pastoral responsibilities or expectations. If there are related expectations these should be named explicitly and reviewed at regular intervals. Congregations are healthiest when they practice a clear understanding of the boundaries in all instances.

- Retirement does not end the relationship of support and accountability between the Authorized Minister and the Committee on Ministry, nor does it signify release from the Ministerial Code. It signals a new phase in a minister's life and a new understanding of their vocation. With gratitude for their faithful service, the church invites retired ministers to live and serve faithfully in new ways.

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EXEMPT STANDING

There may come a time when the retired minister is ready to step away from public ministry and my wish to have Exempt Standing. This is determined in discussion with the COM chair. Exempt ministers are freed from fulfilling the requirements for Ordained Ministerial Standing in the PNC UCC (Annual Information Reviews, attending PNC meetings, Trainings such as Boundary or DEIB). Exempt standing means the minister may no longer serve on Conference Committees or vote at PNC meetings. Exempt ministers are required to have membership in a UCC church (in any Conference), notify the PNC office of current contact information, and follow the *UCC Ministerial Code of Ethics*.

SUMMARY

Maintaining healthy boundaries cannot be underestimated. This is an important part of every minister's vocation. Appropriate boundaries at the time of departure help model life-giving ways to say "good-bye" to one another, as well as provide opportunities for congregations to be able to say "hello" to new pastoral leadership. This work is a holy practice for all the greetings and goodbyes people experience in life

. At every departure, there is a mixture of emotions, including grief. Ministers do well to attend to their own grief in this time, even as they let go of their responsibility to attend to the needs of their former ministry settings.

The purpose of these guidelines is to clarify roles and expectations for all concerned; to help new pastoral relationships take root; to ease departing clergy's transition from pastor to peer in the hearts, minds and souls of pastors and congregations.

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST MINISTERIAL CODE *All persons with ministerial standing in the United Church of Christ are expected to abide by the UCC Ministerial Code.*

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