

Separation Ethics: The Role of a Pastor When Leaving a Congregation

A pastor will at one time or other in his /her career experience a transition from one pastorate to another. This occurs when the pastor accepts a call to another church, moves into a parachurch position or retires. These transitions are not easy for the pastor or for the congregation. The separation from a congregation initiates a vast array of reactions that include happiness, joy, excitement, anger, resentment, grief, fear, sadness, abandonment, and other highly charged emotions. With this variety of feelings, it is incumbent that the pastor who separates from a congregation to respond in a professional manner. It is necessary and helpful that pastors agree to and practice an appropriate form of separation ethics.

The Pacific Union Conference Executive Committee recently approved a statement of ethics for clergy and recommended that it be used by their conferences. The statement, "Moral and Ethical Leadership for Those in Pastoral Ministry," includes this paragraph addressing separation ethics:

Leaving a Parish

The transition of a pastoral family from one parish to another, or moving into retirement, can be delicate and difficult. However, the old must be set aside before the new can be accepted. The congregation can express its appreciation and verbalize its loss through a well-planned farewell for the outgoing pastor.

Pastoral families are to sever ties in the old pastorate, no matter how painful this experience may be.

In spite of this statement and other related recommendations, there are often times when former pastors continue their ties to their previous parish. He/she will continue to perform a pastoral role (counseling, serving on committees, visiting, fund-raising, teaching a Sabbath School class, etc.) though these activities are no longer part of their present ministerial assignment. Such intrusions are disruptive to the work of both the church and the current pastor assigned to that parish. Because of this reality, it is necessary to clearly identify the boundaries at play when a pastor separates from a congregation.

Leaving Ethics

A pastor is a professional who is charged to act in a congregation's best interest. As a professional, it is the pastor's responsibility to practice appropriate ethics. The leaving pastor is responsible to assist the congregation to experience a healthy transition from one pastor to the next. This process is critical to the leaving pastor's final ministry to the members he/she has served. To withhold or thwart this final ministry is a violation of professional ethics.

It is incumbent upon the departing pastor to make sure that parishioners know that his/her pastoral relationship with the congregation ends when he/she leaves. It is vital that the congregation understand that a change in relationship will take place at the conclusion of the leaving pastor's ministry. The departing pastor is responsible to take the lead in preparing the congregation for separation. It is important for the pastor to inform the congregation that a change in the relationship will occur after he/she is no longer their pastor. It is an accepted practice that this communication to the congregation comes through letters, announcements, sermons, and in conversation with leaders and others and should include the following:

- All pastoral and professional relationships and responsibilities that the leaving pastor had with the congregation will end as of the agreed date of the separation.

- The leaving pastor will not be involved in any way in the selection process of either the interim or next installed pastor. He/she will not be involved with the selection of any pastoral search committee. He/she will not influence the church board or congregation members regarding the choice of the incoming pastor.
- The pastor, after leaving, will not engage in conversation with church members or with church staff that relate to the former pastoral assignment and will not offer opinions or criticism about the life of the congregation or the performance of the interim or any subsequent installed pastor.
- Any desire on the part of members of the congregation for the departing pastor to participate in congregational life or in services should be discussed with the interim or subsequent installed pastor and not with the departing pastor.
- The departing pastor may participate in a wedding, a funeral, a dedication, a baptism or any other activity in their previous congregation, after the date of separation by invitation of the interim or installed pastor. If the departing pastor is approached regarding participation in a special event in deference to the new pastor, the requesting parties are to be redirected to the new pastor.
- The departing pastor will sever all ties and relationships with the congregation as it relates to special projects or fund-raising.

Friends

Over the course of one's ministry, friendships develop with members of the congregation. The departure does not mean that these friendships come to an end. Friendships must not be confused with the pastoral relationship. It is not appropriate for the former pastor to fulfill the roles of counseling, calling, conducting weddings, funerals, dedications, and baptisms for any former member, including friends, without adhering to the above guidelines. Neither is it acceptable to offer opinions about the ministry of the former church or its pastor. The leaving pastor ceases to be the pastor and a friend and becomes friend only. It is the departing pastor's responsibility to assure that these guidelines are followed. The leaving pastor has the responsibility to communicate the boundaries in these relationships to all pertinent parties.

Should a former pastor receive a request for pastoral service from a former member, the member needs to be reminded that the current pastor is the one to whom the request should be made. Again, when a former pastor is with friends or members of the former congregation, it is the responsibility of the former pastor to be sure that he/she does not voice criticism or provide evaluative comments regarding the new leadership of the congregation. It is not ethical for the former pastor to comment on the "state of the church," or to be involved in any way in the selection of a successor.

Staff

The leaving pastor has a responsibility to the remaining staff of the church he/she is leaving. As the professional, the leaving pastor has the responsibility to prepare them for the separation that will occur. The staff is to be encouraged to receive and welcome the interim pastor and/or the next installed pastor. It is well to point out that some of their roles may change to fit a new model of ministry. It will ease the transition if it is made clear that the leaving pastor will not be available for counsel or advice regarding the life and work of the church.

Interim and Installed Pastor

The leaving pastor has the responsibility to the interim pastor and/or installed pastor to make sure that any requests that may come to him/her for services in the former congregation be redirected to the interim or installed pastor. It is important that when any request comes to the former pastor, he/she will be in touch with the current pastor to let it be known that contacts have been made with him/her. This is an important courtesy be extended to the current pastor.

It is recommended that the leaving pastor prepare a packet of material relating to the life of the church and the nature of the ministry performed. This material can include, but not limited to, the following:

Life of the Church

- a copy of the history of the congregation
- current church budget
- an evaluation of the congregation's strengths and weaknesses as well as your own strengths and weaknesses
- expected pastoral responsibilities with the various boards and committees of the congregation
- list of current church officers
- list of accomplishments made during your term as church pastor
- project what might be any future needs of the congregation
- any stated mission or vision of the congregation
- reveal those in the congregation who are credibly accused of, personally confessed to, or legally been convicted of sexual harassment or abuse
- local emergency numbers (counselors, suicide hot line, CPS, social services, AA, police, etc.)

Membership

- membership list
- a list of families that had a death or serious illness in the preceding year
- a list of those who had joined the church within the preceding year
- any member needing particular pastoral attention
- any family or member where the relationships are fragile

Events

- a schedule of annual events that are central to the life of the congregation
- a description of cooperative programs with other churches (food bank, ministerial organization, men's and women's ministry, etc.)
- accepted church procedures and participants for the celebration of the Lord's Supper and baptism

Church Property

- a list of recent repairs to the church
- the established process for dealing with any maintenance issues
- repair or structural issues that may need to be addressed in the near future

Personal

- provide some direction as to those in the community who could serve the new pastor as a physician, dentist, real estate agent, car mechanic, insurance broker, etc.
- those locations in your community that have been the best places to shop
- local cultural events

It would be helpful for the leaving pastor to provide contact information (phone number, e-mail address) to the incoming pastor so he/she can contact the former pastor, if needed, regarding various aspects of church life.

Community

Should any community non-church function call the leaving pastor back into the community for a public appearance of whatever nature, as a courtesy, the leaving pastor should inform the current pastor of the fact and the nature of the occasion. This includes involvement with any area church related elementary school, academy, college, or university, or official community event.

Membership

It is advised that the departing pastor and his/her family should not be a part of the worshiping or fellowship life of the congregation he/she has served as pastor. To continue membership in a former congregation can lead to tensions and difficulties. It is recommended that the leaving pastor and his/her family become active in the work and worship of another congregation.

There is a possible exception. The leaving pastor may stay as a worshiping part of the congregation only upon the expressed initiative and invitation of the interim or installed pastor. If such invitation is extended, normally such involvement should not occur until well after the pastor has had an opportunity to establish a relationships with the congregation. If at any time the interim or installed pastor feels that the leaving pastor's presence is disruptive to his/her work and poses a negative impact on congregational life, he/she can request that the former pastor and/or his/her family find another place to worship. The conference executive committee will be in agreement with the installed pastor in any of these matters.

Retired Pastors

At times it is difficult for a pastor who retires to let go of pastoral roles. Wherever a retired pastor has membership, he/she must be careful about the relation with and support of the ministry of the installed pastor. His/her approach to ministry may not match nor be in agreement with what the retired pastor believes are the best ministry practices. However, it is the installed pastor who is called to serve. The role of the retired pastor in a congregation is to respect and support the pastor. The retired pastor, as a member of the congregation, is to receive the gifts of ministry the pastor provides.

Retired pastors are often granted **Honorary/Emeritus Credentials** by the local union conference. These credentials are granted as a courtesy and come with no pastoral authority or duty. Yet they underscore that those holding these credentials are expected to act ethically in their relationships. This includes supporting one's pastor and his/her ministry.

Church

It is appropriate for a congregation to arrange for an occasion when the church and pastor may formally say goodbye. It is strongly recommended that you and your family graciously accept the congregation's desire and participate with them in any program that would honor a pastor's ministry.

Liturgy for a Departing Pastor

L: Pastor _____, on _____ you became our pastor. You came to proclaim God's Word, to baptize new members into the church of Jesus Christ, to raise us to heaven in worship, to announce God's forgiveness, and to celebrate the Lord's Supper. With the Gospel you have comforted us in times of sickness and trouble, and at the death of our loved ones. You have shared our joys and sorrows. You and your family have been important to our life together.

You have served our congregation faithfully for ____ years. You are now leaving our fellowship (to become pastor of _____). As your fellow members of this congregation we wish to honor your ministry among us and bid you farewell and ask God's anointing on your new endeavor, bringing closure to your ministry at _____ Seventh-day Adventist Church.

P: I thank the members of the _____ Seventh-day Adventist Church for the love, the kindness, and the support shown to me (and my family) during my active ministry among you. I ask forgiveness for the ways I have offended you. I am grateful for the ways my ministry has been accepted. As I leave, I carry with me a priceless gift: the memory of our time together and all that I have learned here.

C: We receive your thankfulness. We offer you our forgiveness. We accept that you now leave to continue your ministry (in another congregation). We express our gratitude for your time among us. We ask forgiveness for the ways we have offended you. Your influence on our faith and faithfulness will not leave us at your departure.

P: I forgive you and accept your gratitude, trusting that our time together and our parting are pleasing to God.

O: Do you, members of _____ Seventh-day Adventist Church, release (–name–) from the duties as pastor of this congregation?

C: We do, with God's blessing.

O: Do you offer encouragement and prayers for (his/her) ministry as it unfolds in (his/her) new (congregation)?

C: We do, through the grace of God.

O: Do you, Pastor _____, release _____ Seventh-day Adventist Church from turning to you and depending on you?

P: I do, through the grace of God.

O: Do you offer your encouragement and prayers for the continued ministry here?

P: I do, with God's blessing.

O: On behalf of the Southeastern California Conference, I am a witness to the words spoken here: words of thankfulness, forgiveness, and release. We hold you in our prayers as you begin your ministry at _____ (or as you retire). We pledge our support and love to you and wish you God's grace and peace.

L: Let us pray:

A: God, whose everlasting love for all is trustworthy, help each of us to trust the future which rests in your care. The time we were together in your name saw our laughter and tears, our hopes and disappointments. Guide us as we hold these cherished memories but move us in new directions, until that time to come when we are completely one with you and with each other; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

L: A leader or leaders from the congregation

P: The pastor

C: Congregation

O: Conference representative

A: All

Southeastern California Conference of Seventh-day Adventist

Separation Ethics

I have received the document entitled **Separation Ethics: The Role of a Pastor When Leaving a Congregation** and have read it carefully.

When I leave a congregation, I will seek to strengthen the church by announcing in a timely manner my intended departure and will expedite appropriate closure of my ministry to that congregation.

I will refrain from speaking disparagingly about the person or work of any other minister, especially my predecessor or successor.

I will return to a former parish to perform professional services, such as weddings, baptisms, and funerals, only if invited by the resident pastor.

I will treat with respect and courtesy any predecessor who returns to my church field.

I will be thoughtful and respectful to all retired ministers and, upon my retirement, I will support and show respect to my pastor.

I will treat with respect and accept any decisions made by supervising personnel and leaders who may have initiated my separation from a church.

Name _____ Date _____