

A Covenant of Separation Between a Departing Pastor and a Congregation

Synod of the Great Lakes
Classis of Zeeland

Introduction

When pastors leave churches, for whatever reason, what follows next is a time of adjustment for both the pastor and the congregation. They have shared moments of joy, grief, struggle, birth, life and death, and have been united by a unique and sacred bond. At the same time, the pastoral dimensions of this relationship are appropriate only so long as the called or contracted clergy-congregation relationship is valid and in force. At the time of a pastor's departure it is very important to distinguish between pastoral/professional roles and relationships and those personal friendships which have developed during the pastor's tenure. When the date ending a clergy-congregation relationship arrives, the pastoral ministry of the departing pastor should end. At that time, the pastoral ministry expectations placed on that pastor by the congregation should also end.

After the date ending a pastoral relationship, a former pastor or interim minister should only officiate at weddings, funerals, baptism, or services on the church premises with the invitation and/or consent of the Board of Elders. Former pastors should refrain from continuing to counsel former parishioners. They should also refrain from offering insights concerning the affairs of the congregation, or from performing any other pastoral functions. When the departing pastor continues to live in the community of a former parish, it is often advisable to find another congregation for regular worship out of sensitivity to the church and its future.

Whenever possible, the Pastoral Relations Committee of the classis may arrange a meeting between the departing pastor and the new pastor of the congregation. At this meeting insights and concerns about the congregation may be shared directly in such a way as to enhance the future ministries of both pastors and the congregation.

The consistory of the church can facilitate the transition by informing the congregation clearly about the Covenant of Separation and the reasons for it. It can also encourage members to intentionally pursue a new relationship with the new pastor. If there are compelling reasons to have the former pastor participate in a service, the roles assumed by the former pastor and new pastor should be cooperatively agreed upon.

The departing pastor can help to implement this policy by announcing the Covenant of Separation in advance and by emphasizing the reasons for it. S/he should be cautious regarding invitations to perform pastoral duties as requested by members of the congregation. In many instances it will be appropriate to refer such requests to the consistory or the new pastor. The departing pastor may also identify to the new pastor those close friends within the congregation with whom continuing contact will be maintained. The departing pastor will be encouraged to contact the new pastor whenever requests are made for calling, visiting, or other pastoral activities that most clearly belong to the new pastoral relationship. Open communication between the former and new pastors, if done in a creative and positive way, can honor and strengthen the ministries of both.

COVENANT OF SEPARATION

This covenant will guide the future relationship between:

the Rev. _____

and the congregation of _____.

This covenant intends to honor and protect the work of the departing pastor and to strengthen and enable new pastoral leadership. This covenant is signed by the departing pastor and the consistory, on behalf of the congregation, out of deep gratitude and respect for the special relationships that develop between pastor and people, but also toward the goal of establishing a solid foundation for future pastoral relationships and ministry.

1. Effective _____ (date) the Rev. _____ relinquishes all pastoral and administrative duties for this congregation. S/he will officiate at weddings, funerals, baptisms, or other services of this congregation only with the invitation and/or consent of the Board of Elders.

2. The Rev. _____ promises to support the future pastoral and lay leadership of the church. S/he will not become involved in conversations or activities that may undermine any program, person, or purpose of the church. When appropriate, open and direct communication with the new pastoral staff is encouraged.

3. Calls of a pastoral nature and conversations about congregational concerns are to be referred to the new pastor. All continuing relationships between the Rev. _____ and members of the congregation will be as friends, and are no longer part of a prior pastor-parishioner role and relationship.

We the undersigned agree to this covenant as stated above:

Vice President of Consistory _____

Date: _____

Pastor _____

Date: _____