GUIDELINES FOR WHEN A MINISTER RETIRES OR MOVES ON TO ANOTHER PASTORATE

During the course of a pastoral relationship, a pastor develops many bonds with the members of a congregation. Some of these bonds are personal – friendships based on mutual experiences and shared joys. Some of these bonds develop from the experience of leadership. Some of the deepest of these bonds are emotional – the natural result of pastoral experiences when the ministry of the pastor touches the life of a church member during highly emotional life experiences.

The ties that bind pastor and people are so deep that when a minister retires or is called to another church, care must be taken to respect the power of these former bonds and to allow everyone to foster new bonds. It is the hope of Shenandoah Presbytery that relationships can continue while allowing the pastor and the members of the former church to grow as persons and as disciples of the living Christ. While no set rules can govern every situation, these guidelines may be helpful to the congregation, to the former and to the new pastor.

It is incumbent upon the former pastor to model the nature of this new relationship. The new relationship is one of interest in, but not ministry to the former congregation. The former pastor is encouraged to ask for news from the church and to show support for the continuing and changing ministries of the former pastorate. The former pastor is also encouraged to contact the new pastor with words of encouragement and develop a friendly, supportive and professional relationship.

What distinguishes this new relationship is that the former pastor is discouraged from nurturing the previous roles that brought her or him into emotional contact with members of the church. The former pastor is also discouraged from offering advice or counsel that might re-establish the leadership bonds the pastor once had with the church. If someone attempts to bring the former minister into conflicts or problems in the ministry of the new minister, the former pastor should direct that person to speak not to him or her, but to the new minister or to the current leadership of the church.

When asked to engage in a pastoral ministry in the former pastorate, such as participating in a wedding or funeral, the former pastor is to say that he or she will only respond to such a request from the current pastor or interim. The same is true on those occasions when the former minister might be asked to visit the hospital or call someone after a death. The former pastor may acknowledge bonds of friendship but must clearly not confuse the congregation by offering a relationship of prayer or sacrament that is based upon the former pastoral responsibilities.

The new pastor is encouraged to build a relationship with the former pastor. Recognizing that the ties that bind the members of a congregation to a former pastor have been forged through the unique experience of the pastorate, the new pastor can honor those experiences while focusing the church on future relationships. The new pastor can nurture good communication by including the former pastor in newsletters and other mailings. News of the former pastor can be shared with the rest of the congregation. The former pastor and family may be invited to attend special events at the church as the particular guest of the new pastor. The new pastor would do well to remember that his or her position is never enhanced by speaking poorly of the former pastor, no matter how that relationship
developed.

When requested by a church member to invite the former pastor to join in a pastoral ministry such as a wedding or funeral, the new pastor should consider the invitation and exert some control on how the former pastor will participate. These are opportunities to honor the past and encourage a new sense of self in the members of the congregation.

Members of the congregation should remember that while the former pastor is no longer the pastor, she or he will be interested in the life of the congregation they served. There is a difference between pastoral ties and personal friendships. The bonds of leadership and pastoral ministry may be over, but there is a continuing interest in one another’s joys and celebrations and journeys of faith. The former pastor should not be excluded from continuing personal friendships with members of the congregation, but it is not appropriate to call upon the former pastor for pastoral services such as weddings, funerals or hospital visits. When there is a strong reason to include the former pastor in these services, this should be shared with the current pastor, and together you can decide if the current pastor will offer such an invitation. The same is true about the leadership responsibilities of the former pastor. It is not appropriate to ask the former pastor for advice about church matters. It is appropriate to talk to your new pastor directly when you are concerned about these matters.

The Session can play an important role insuring that this new relationship between a pastor and the former pastorate encourages new beginnings for all parties. The Session can hold the members of the church accountable when they reach out inappropriately to the former minister and coach church members on how to honor the new relationship that has developed. The Session can support the new minister in reaching out to the former pastor. The Session can also offer counsel when the new minister is asked to include the former pastor in current pastoral activities such as funerals and weddings.

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