

Approved by the Presbytery of St. Augustine

October 5, 2021

Guidelines for Separation Ethics

Note: This policy is effective on October 5, 2021, and governs pastor transitions that begin after that date. The Call Commission of the Presbytery of St. Augustine will ensure that pastors and sessions in transition are provided with a reminder and copy of the policy. For calls that ended prior to the effective date of the policy, the policy will apply to the full extent possible, subject to exceptions and variations that have already taken place (for example, when a previous pastor already teaches a Sunday school class).

Purpose and Scope

The transition that occurs at the end of a pastor's call to a church is a key milestone giving rise to emotions and adjustments. Over time, members of the church have developed a special relationship with the pastor involving elements of trust, confidence, affection, caring and love. This time of change is governed by ethics that ensure a healthy separation. This will allow the congregation to be free to adjust and make room for a relationship to grow between the new pastor and the community. It will also allow the pastor to adjust and focus on God's new call to the pastor and family.

The following separation guidelines apply to installed pastors, temporary pastors (interim, stated supply, parish associate, etc.) and commissioned ruling elders (CREs) and are particularly important when the pastor continues to reside in the community.

Dissolving the Relationship

The date of dissolution will be shared first with the presbytery, session and staff, and then clearly communicated in writing to the congregation. In the case of an installed pastor, the session will call a congregational meeting to formally approve the dissolution of the call.

The session and pastor will cooperate in attending to all aspects of a "good goodbye," including transition of leadership/administrative duties, return of keys, credit cards, and personal property belonging to the church, and opportunities for fellowship and mutual expressions of appreciation and blessing. The session and pastor will educate the congregation about separation ethics. The departing pastor sets the tone for the imminent and permanent change in the relationship between pastor and parishioners.

The Call Commission believes that an exit interview can be of benefit to the church and the pastor and will conduct an exit interview with the departing pastor if requested by the session or the pastor or if it is initiated by the Call Commission. The Call Commission always encourages an exit interview between the pastor and the session and will provide questions for discussion in that interview.

When a Pastor Leaves a Congregation

When the relationship between a pastor and a church is dissolved, the minister pastor should publicly announce that he or she will no longer be available for pastoral services to the members of that church. The pastor will make it clear that the pastoral relationship and the pastor's involvement in the life of the church will come to an end. Though friendships may be preserved, they will not be confused with the pastoral relationship. Thereafter, the pastor should fulfill his or her announced intention by resolutely declining all requests from members of that church to conduct baptisms, weddings, or funerals, regardless of the location. Counseling, visiting, or calling on members of the church is also not appropriate / not permitted. If a request comes to the pastor, the appropriate response is to decline the request, explain the reason for the response, and to let the successor pastor know that the request was made. The obligation of self-restraint rests more heavily upon the former pastor than on the incumbent. If an exception is made, it will be rare and upon the invitation of the successor pastor or the session through the moderator or clerk of session if there is no pastoral leadership.

It is the departing pastor's responsibility to see that this really happens.

The pastor will not be involved in any way in the selection of a successor pastor, whether a temporary pastor, interim, stated supply, or installed pastor. Due care should be exercised not to influence, by direction or indirection, either by spoken or written word, the selection of the ministerial successor or the successor's ministerial policies. If a pastor visits a former parish, special discretion is required. It would be proper, in such instances, to pay one's respects to one's successor in ministry. Frequent visits to the former parish are to be avoided.

The pastor will not criticize the successor pastor(s), the staff, or the ordained officers/ session of the church. If members contact the pastor to discuss the state of the church, the pastor will decline to discuss the matter. If any concerns exist, they will be discussed with the successor pastor(s) directly or with the Call Commission.

When One Is Elected "Pastor Emeritus"

When a pastor retires, the congregation may bestow upon him or her the title of Pastor Emeritus. To elect one as pastor or associate pastor emeritus:

- is evidence of a long and loving, mutually caring pastoral relationship.
- is a congregation's way of saying to the church-at-large and to the world that they love this person and are thankful for his or her time with them
- is a gift to the retired pastor which says something special to him or her

However, the pastoral relationship has been dissolved. The relationship of pastor to people has ended, and there is no expectation of the person to be present with the congregation because of the election. All expectations related to the former pastor of a congregation apply to a pastor emeritus.

Additional Guidelines

At least two years following the start date of the new (not interim) pastor, the departing pastor and family may discern that it is appropriate to attend services and events at the church. Prior to that time, attendance (not participation of any kind unless invited to do so by the current pastor) at a wedding or funeral of a church member may occur on rare occasions provided that the pastor first advises the successor pastor (or moderator or clerk of session if there is no pastoral leadership) and the chair of the Call Commission. In the case of an associate pastor or a parish associate, the appropriate time period will be discussed with the head of staff/solo pastor, associate pastors on staff, and the Call Commission.

The limitations contained in this policy do not prevent an elected officer or member of presbytery staff from attending a presbytery or major public event held at a church such as an ordination, installation, presbytery meeting, presbytery educational event, speaker series, etc.

The limitations of this policy do not prevent a pastor from serving as a Sunday supply preacher at the request of a pastor of the church or, in the case of a church that is without installed, interim or stated supply leadership, at the request of the session.

Guidance and Support

The Call Commission, the Mission and Ministry Coordinator, the Stated Clerk, and the church's Area Relationship Coordinator are all available to assist the pastor, church leadership, and the congregation in following healthy and ethical steps for separation. Representatives from the presbytery will meet with church leadership regarding the process of seeking the next pastor and will walk with the session and search committee through the pastoral transition. If issues arise involving a former pastor, the current pastor is encouraged to speak with the former pastor directly. If issues continue or no resolution is reached, the current pastor may contact the Chair of the Call Commission for assistance and guidance.

When any of these guidelines would place an extraordinary burden on the pastor or pastor's family, only the Call Commission may agree to lift or alter the guidelines. Reasons may include the health of the pastor and/or family, the reason for leaving the call, the relationship of the pastor and family to the church before the call (for example, an honorably retired pastor worshipping at the church serves as a parish associate, and then that service ends), the need for church involvement, and the overall health and welfare of the congregation.

If a time-sensitive exception to the policy is needed, the person or session making the request should contact the Chair of the Call Commission or the Vice-Chair if the Chair is not available). All other exception requests will be considered at a Call Commission meeting.

Finally, the Call Commission recognizes that this policy cannot cover all situations relating to departure of a pastor, and all are invited to reach out to the Chair or Vice Chair of the Call Commission to ask questions and to seek the advice of the Call Commission regarding a particular situation.

Responsibility for Following Guidelines Is Primarily on the Departing Pastor

Following these guidelines is the responsibility of the departing pastor, the session, and the presbytery, but as the one in the professional leadership role, the departing pastor has the primary responsibility for observing ethics and maintaining boundaries. Session members must be sensitive to the congregation's feeling of loss while also demonstrating through their actions the importance of following these guidelines. If the session is open to new possibilities and prepares the congregation for change, the work of the Holy Spirit will be evident in the life of the congregation throughout the transition and beyond.