

Pastoral Transition: Policy of the Northern Great Lakes Synod Adopted by the Synod Council January 25, 2014

By showing high regard to the current pastor, congregational members and clergy affirm the significance of the pastoral office which was once held by the former pastor.

Pastors and Congregational Leaders should be aware of the following provision of the Synod Constitution:

S14.14. Ordained ministers shall respect the integrity of the ministry of the congregations which they do not serve and shall not exercise ministerial functions therein unless invited to do so by the pastor, or if there is not duly called pastor, then by the interim pastor in consultation with the Congregation Council.

Congregations and pastors are to understand the professional ethics of ministry relating to former pastors, interim pastors and current pastors. A pastor who resigns or retires from a congregational ministry setting no longer serves as pastor to members of this congregation. Former pastors should not agree to pastoral responsibilities that rightfully belong to the current pastor of the congregation.

The PURPOSE of this paper is to clearly state the proper boundaries for former pastors, interim pastors, current pastors, and members of congregations relative to ongoing pastoral responsibilities and duties.

Former Pastors

If a former pastor is asked to officiate at a special service by members, he/she should respond immediately by saying: "Thank you very much for asking me, but it is simply NOT appropriate for me to do that since I am no longer your pastor." The former pastor then encourages them to communicate with their present pastor.

It is very natural that members turn again to a former pastor who perhaps baptized their children, or performed weddings and funerals for family members while serving as the family's pastor. Again, with great sensitivity, the former pastor should graciously decline and direct the family to their current pastor. As with other family friends, the former pastor might attend the service as a guest.

Former pastors should avoid the comment to members, "You'll need to speak *first* to your present called pastor about me doing this." Such a comment places the current pastor in the very awkward situation of having to relinquish the pastoral role to the former pastor, or saying no to the members' request and thus appearing insensitive, uncaring or insecure.

Interim Pastors

The interim pastor is the current pastor of the congregation until that time comes when the new pastor assumes the role of pastor and shepherd of the congregation. Whether part-time or full-time, the interim pastor should be contacted for all pastoral acts during the transition time. The former pastor should not be contacted by members to return to perform a pastoral responsibility during the transition. Exceptions to this are possible in extraordinary circumstances with permission of the bishop.

Current Pastors

Current pastors should speak as positively as possible of the ministry of former pastors even though their style and vision might be very different. The current pastor should never feel pressured to relinquish his/her pastoral role to a former pastor. When a current pastor feels it is appropriate and healthy to invite a former pastor to return to participate in worship in a supportive role, he/she can certainly extend such an invitation.

Members and Friends of the Congregation

Members should avoid placing both the current and former pastors in awkward positions by seeking the pastoral services of a former pastor. Members should simply not ask for such favors from former pastors. By showing high regard to the current pastor, members affirm the significance of the pastoral office which was once held by the former pastor.

Pastors Relating to Previously Served Parishes

When a pastor accepts a call to a congregation, a sacred covenant is established between the pastor and the people of God in that place. In order for ministry to be strong and effective, the covenant needs to be strengthened and nurtured until God calls that pastor to another sector of ministry. When a pastor resigns a call, the covenant ends.

How does a pastor relate appropriately to members of a congregation where one has previously served? We offer the following guidelines so that good choices can be made which do not negatively affect the ministry of the people of God.

1. It is your responsibility as a former pastor to decline invitations to conduct pastoral acts (baptisms, weddings, funerals, hospital visits, etc.) in any former parish. It is important that you do not pass the burden of such decisions back to the pastor who currently holds that call nor to elected congregational leaders. As professional people, we commit ourselves to act responsibly in these matters. For the sake of the church and the ongoing ministry of the congregation, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." When we do that, our relating to members of previous parishes can be used by God to build up the body of Christ.
2. It is your responsibility as a former pastor to be supportive of your successor (even when that is difficult to do). It is your responsibility to sever pastoral ties with your former congregation.
3. While the above statements are addressed to pastors, spouses of pastors must consider the same factors and also respect the recommendations made above. Spouses share a pastoral identity.

If the congregation, council or current pastor experiences difficulties with proper boundaries being maintained, the bishop should be contacted.

(Based on the policy of the Southwestern Minnesota Synod and the South Dakota Synod)