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The relationship of ordained, commissioned, and/or licensed ministers to former parishes: A teaching document regarding common practices.

The United Church of Christ is a church of covenants. Among our greatest strengths are the covenants we make with one another about our life together. These covenants are stated in many different ways and places, including the Constitution and By-Laws of the national United Church of Christ, Conferences, Associations, and local churches, in the UCC Manual on Ministry, and in the services of ordination, commissioning, or licensing, and services of installation. **Ordained, commissioned, and licensed ministers are expected to represent and embody well the covenants that make us who we are.**

Regarding the issue of the relationship of the authorized ministers to former parishes, there are several sections of the Ordained Minister's Code (in the UCC Manual on Ministry, section 1, pp. 11-19) that provide the foundation for the practices commonly observed throughout the church. These include:

- I will regard all persons with equal respect and concern and undertake to minister impartially.
- I will not perform pastoral services within a parish or for a member of a parish without the consent of the pastor of that parish.
- I will deal honorably with the record of my predecessor and successor.
- I will not upon my termination and departure from a ministry position, interfere with nor intrude upon the ministry of my successor.

In addition, in the Manual on Ministry's chapter, "The Local Church in Relation to its Pastor," (section 1, pp. 20-21) a section on Ethics in Ministry says, "We recognize that we have called our pastor as the pastoral leader of this local church, and we will not invite other pastors to provide pastoral services within this church or to members of this church without our pastor's consent."

This ethic is usually reiterated during services of closure when departing pastors declare that they "release this church from turning to him/her for pastoral services." We have found that such closure is extremely important in helping a congregation prepare appropriately to receive and affirm new pastoral leadership. **Closure needs to be clear and unambiguous.**

Frequently asked questions:

1. Why do we have this ethic? What is the problem with a former pastor being asked to do pastoral services for member or family members of a former parish?

When a former pastor returns for pastoral services, this runs a significant risk of sending a confusing signal to the congregation that this pastor has not really brought closure to her/his pastoral relationship to the congregation. In addition, there is a great risk that returning for one person or one family will be felt as favoritism being shown by the pastor, in direct violation of the code of ministering impartially. Further, when a former pastor returns, there is a great risk of interfering with the developing relationship between the congregation and its new pastor. While it certainly is true that a pastor of many years will

know members of the congregation better than the new pastor, a new pastor never has a chance even to begin building relationships if the congregation continues to turn to a former pastor for pastoral services and the former pastor allows and encourages this.

2. Is it all right for a former pastor to return if the current pastor gives her/his permission?

This can be a tricky matter. Once in awhile, the current pastor becomes aware of a compelling reason to invite the participation of a former pastor, and these invitations may be extended when in the judgment of the current pastor there are needs of both the family and of the church that may be met by such an invitation. Former pastors, when asked directly by a member or family member of a former parish are expected to respond something like this: “Thanks, I am genuinely honored to be asked, but as a matter of professional ethics I do not return to a former parish for pastoral services.” They are not expected to say, “Yes, I’d love to, but you’ll have to ask the current pastor (or the moderator, the Associate Conference Minister, etc.) for permission.” Such a response puts the current pastor in a no-win situation and is an indication that the former pastor is not willing to take responsibility for embodying the professional ethics commonly observed by ordained, commissioned, and licensed ministers.

3. What if the church is in a genuine in-between time (i.e. there isn’t an interim minister or installed minister in place when a need arises or when planning need to begin, such as for a funeral or wedding)?

Usually churches have made some arrangement for pastoral services even in the in-between times. If so, that person should be contacted first. If the next pastor has been called (or is the recommended candidate of a search committee, soon to be called) but has not yet arrived and no one else is officially on duty, the new person should be given the opportunity to respond. Sometimes a newly-called-but-not-yet-on-duty pastor will invite the assistance of a former pastor in such circumstances. Another frequently used option is to invite help from a pastor from another nearby church or from a local chaplain or pastoral counselor.

4. What if the event requiring pastoral services is not going to happen in the church building (i.e. a baptism at the seashore...)?

The issue is not where but whom. If the pastoral services are being provided for members or family members of the pastor’s former parish, the same concerns apply. If a former pastor performs a baptism at the seashore for members or family members of a former parish, the risk is great that this will send a signal to the congregation that this former pastor has not really brought closure to his/her ministry in that congregation, which then opens the door for more invitations to the former pastor – or sets the stage for the considerable unhappiness that occurs when some invitations are accepted and others are turned down.

There are, of course, endless numbers of scenarios involving former pastors and former parishioners where the usual covenants may blur. For example, a college student goes off to college and discovers that the pastor of her home church back in New Jersey is now the pastor of the church next door to her college. She becomes an Associate Member of this church, and now her former pastor is also her present, on-site pastor. When she decides to get married, she asks to be married in the college church by her former pastor who is also her present pastor even though there is a new pastor back home.

5. What about former pastors continuing in friendships with former parishioners?

If former pastors remain in the church they once served (which occasionally happens in small communities where there may be no other good options for a church for the former pastor and that pastor's family), former pastors who wish to maintain a friendship with former parishioners would be well advised to observe some boundaries in the relationship:

- 1) They do not talk about the church in any way that even remotely might be interpreted as criticism or second-guessing the current pastor; and
- 2) They do not perform pastoral functions for friends who are still members of the pastor's former parish.

In fact, they should take great care not to behave in a way that even looks like pastoral activity, such as calling on friends who may be ill. Although the pastor may believe that, "I am just making this call as a friend, not as a pastor," calling in homes, hospitals, or nursing homes has most of the appearances of a pastoral activity and will be regarded as such by many in the congregation.

6. What about family members of a former pastor who may wish to remain as members of the church after the pastor has moved on?

This happens a lot – the pastor's children grow up and decide to settle in the community where they grew up even after the pastor moves on. Or when a pastor dies and his/her family chooses to remain in the same community. When this happened, these remaining family members almost always experience change in their own role and "place" in the congregation. Sometimes that change is welcome, but sometimes it can be troubling to the family members. Sometimes it is also troubling to family members to watch another pastor lead the congregation and receive the attention that was once directed to the former pastor. In such cases, where there are other compatible churches available, it may be best for everyone for family members of the former pastor to plant new roots in another congregation.

When family members remain in a congregation, there may be times when a former pastor will come to a church event not as a former pastor but as a parent or grandparent, spouse or partner. When such occasions arise, the courteous practice is for the former pastor to contact the current pastor so that together the past and present pastors may find the most comfortable way for the former pastor to be present for special events where a family member is involved.

7. Are there degrees of possible involvement coupled with elapsed time since the pastorate in question?

It is almost **never** a good idea to return as a member to a church you previously served – no matter the span of time.

The local church has a long memory of its past and of those who have served the church. Legends develop. With memory comes a romanticism of the "way things used to be." Even those who have joined the church since you resigned or retired will have heard the stories and will have already formulated an opinion of who and what you were in relationship to the church and its people. They, too, will have expectations of your participation in the church.

If you become an active member/participant in the church you previously serviced, your role will always be seen, in part, as pastor, teacher and leader in and for the life of the church. Your thoughts and opinions concerning the current leadership and ministry of the church will be sought out. There will be

confusion and hurt feelings by the membership as to why you will not baptize that grandchild or do the memorial service for a long-standing member of the church whom you knew well or participate in the wedding of children you confirmed. There will be a comparison made of your leadership and the current leadership of the church.

At best your presence will be ambivalent and ghost-like. At worst your presence will undermine the authority and presence of the current leadership.

8. What about when a church wants to have a continuing relationship with a former pastor?

Sometimes when a pastor retires and continues in the community where her/his former parish is located, churches ask if that pastor can continue to serve in some way. Using the freedom of our polity, churches have sometimes entered into covenants with retired pastors for continuing service. While these are done with the best of intentions, nevertheless all the concerns about relationship between former pastors and former churches stated in this document need to be considered before a church enters into such a relationship. If a church is contemplating a covenant relationship with a former pastor, the leadership is urged to contact an Associate Conference Minister or Conference Minister and/or the Chair of the Committee on Ministry for guidance.

9. What about when a church wishes to honor a former pastor by granting him/her the title of “Pastor Emeritus?”

Many churches have honored a former pastor, especially one who has retired, by granting the title, “Pastor Emeritus.” It is a way a church can express its love for a pastor at the time of his/her leaving. It does not mean that the retired pastor continues in a pastoral relationship with that church.

10. What if a former pastor stays in the community and sets up a private counseling practice? Is it all right for her/him to counsel former parishioners?

This is generally a risky thing to do. The net effect is that the former pastor is still functioning in a pastoral role with former parishioners, and closure of those relationships has not really happened. Pastors we know of who have tried to do this generally report that it has not worked very well.

11. What about lay workers who have served in a ministry position but who are not ordained, licensed, or commissioned?

Virtually all of the same ethical guidelines apply to lay workers who have served in a ministry position.

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The best gift a church can give to a former pastor is to form strong pastoral bonds with the new pastor, so that the church has a healthy future. This gives the former pastor the deep satisfaction of knowing that her/his service there has continued to bear fruit.

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There are countless circumstances where the usual covenants blur, where there may not be clear and easy answers. In all such occasions, common courtesy and careful attention by the pastors or former lay staff involved to the fundamental ethics of ministry will produce an amicable outcome.

This document is not intended to be a new policy but rather a teaching document to help clarify and interpret ethical understandings outlined in the United Church of Christ Manual on Ministry and expressed in the vows taken at the time of ordination. The perspectives in this document arise from experience with difficult situations that often emerge when appropriate boundaries between former pastors and former parishes are not carefully observed.

Revised for MN Conference UCC from previous Eastern Association, MN Conference UCC drafts. By vote of the Committee on Ministry on July 24, 2008 this document was affirmed as a teaching document and commended to the whole Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ.