

A Resource for Churches and Pastors: When a Pastor Leaves

When a Pastor Leaves the Relationship Changes

When any pastor leaves it is difficult for both the congregation and the pastor. The following is a digested version of a longer teaching document available from the Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ for guiding everyone through this change. The guidelines below come from reflection on the code of ethics and vows taken upon ordination and in response to the experiences of many pastors and churches who have walked this journey.

1. When the pastoral relationship between a minister and a congregation is dissolved, the nature and character of the relationship changes.
2. To fully engage and establish a new relationship with the next pastor, both the pastor that leaves and the congregation must disengage from their relationship. (As affirmed in the UCC Book of Worship, Order for Times of Passage: Farewell)
3. Congregation members should contact their current pastor for all types of pastoral services, within the congregation or any other setting. Previous pastors of a congregation should not perform pastoral services for members or family members of a previous congregation.
4. In general, previous pastors of a congregation should create some distance and space to allow for new relationships to form with the new pastor in a congregation and should not have contact with former parishioners or return to their former churches (unless there is an official invitation from the church governing board for an official event).

5. When one meets a former pastor at denominational or other wider church gatherings, there is no need to avoid one another, and general friendliness is hoped for and expected. But, conversations about the local church or personal needs are not appropriate, so as to honor the relationship and role of the new pastor in the congregation.

When a pastor leaves, it is important that church members look to each other, their faith, their new pastoral leadership, and the people within the denomination; not to their former pastor.

As in many positions of similar influence and responsibility, the former pastor bears the primary responsibility for maintaining the boundaries in the “past pastor” relationship.

These guidelines help congregations welcome and connect with their new pastor. They also minister to the former pastor by giving them permission to let go and move on.

For a more detailed discussion of the questions, ethics, and experiences of the relationship between pastors and previous congregations they have served, please see the document, “The relationship of ordained, commissioned, and/or licensed ministers to former parishes: A teaching document regarding common practices.” It is available from the MN Conference United Church of Christ website: uccmn.org.

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