

CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

GUIDELINES MINISTERIAL SERVICE AND MEMBERSHIP IN A FORMER PARISH

This paper was prepared by the Office of Ministry in consultation with the Council of District Executives/Ministers. These guidelines are based on papers adopted by Standing Committee and Annual Conference. Thus, these guidelines are commended to districts, congregations, and licensed and ordained ministers in the Church of the Brethren.

I. INTRODUCTION

The question has been asked many times about when it is appropriate for a minister¹ to provide ministerial services to parishioners in a former parish. The 1988 Standing Committee statement on “Guidelines for Ministerial Relationships” attempts to answer the question by saying . . .

The performance of ministerial functions in another pastor's parish is considered unethical and is to be avoided. Rare and special circumstances may be negotiated between ministers (especially pastors), always in the spirit of good will and understanding. (2000 *Ministerial Leadership Manual*, p. AC120.11)

Involvement of a minister in the ministerial services (pastoral counseling, performing weddings, conducting funerals, etc.) in a former parish shall be brought to the attention of the District Ministry Commission. If the minister is now serving in a different district, the District Executive/Minister of that district shall be requested to counsel that such service be discontinued. (2000 *Ministerial Leadership Manual*, p. AC120.12)

The 1996 “Ethics in Ministry Relations” paper also seeks to address this concern in Section III, Code of Ethics for Ordained and Licensed Ministers and Lay Speakers. That paper states . . .

We will not perform professional services in former parishes, unless invited to do so by the present pastor. We consider it unethical to be involved in the pastoral affairs of a congregation after leaving it or upon retirement, or to cultivate relationships with former parishioners as may hinder the ministry of the new pastor. (2000 *Ministerial Leadership Manual*, p. AC80.6ff.)

Experience makes it clear that the words “unless invited to do so by the current pastor” can be

1. This policy statement applies to all former staff persons who are licensed or ordained in the Church of the Brethren.

problematic. The *current* pastor may feel pressure (extreme at times) from an individual or a family to invite the former pastor back for a wedding, funeral, or other services. The current pastor may not favor the return of the former pastor, but he/she is placed in a situation where it is difficult to say no. Former pastors must be alert and sensitive to these pressures and make every effort not to place the current pastor in uncomfortable and difficult situations.

The 2008 “Ethics in Ministry Relations” further clarifies these issues. The paper states in Section III. Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders, under the sub-section, “Integrity of the Ministerial Call”.

- O. I will honor the ministry of clergy colleagues in our denomination and in the larger Christian community, striving to work with them in a collegial manner. I will not proselytize people from other churches. I will only perform ministerial services, such as weddings, funerals, baptisms, anointings, pastoral counseling, and critical pastoral care, in another congregation at the request of the current pastor and that build up the ministry and mission of the body of Christ in that place.
- P. I will honor the ministry of pastors in my former parishes. It is inappropriate to be involved in the pastoral ministry of a congregation after leaving it or upon retirement, or to perform ministerial services, or to cultivate such relationships with former parishioners, if it hinders the ministry of the congregation and pastor. I will only perform ministerial services, such as weddings, funerals, baptisms, anointing, pastoral counseling, and critical pastoral care, in another congregation at the request of the current pastor.
- Q. Whenever serving in another category of ministerial leadership (i.e., chaplain, professor, denominational leader, retired, etc.) than pastoral/congregational ministry, I will honor the ministry of my pastor and congregation by being aware of my informal authority. I will not exert undue influence in the internal workings of my congregation.

Recognizing that we are a highly relational denomination, healthy ministerial relationships are developed, flourish, and grow when we honor and respect one another’s ministry; past, present, and future. "It is essential that we understand that our ordination is for the benefit of the church and her mission in the world. It is not something for our advantage; it is not a personal right or entitlement. We are not ordained to be private chaplains to whomever we please." In Gaylord Noyce’s words, “This rule of nonmeddling is not a mere legalism; it stems from the overriding concern for the church." To undermine another’s ministry by the continued exercise of our pastoral role in a former parish is a betrayal of our ordination. It delays and can even weaken the formation of new relationships between an incumbent pastor and congregation and even the wider community.”²

In an effort to assist in the development of healthy collegial ministerial relationships and to create a common understanding among congregations, clergy, districts, and the denomination, the Office of Ministry offers the following guidelines.

II. GUIDELINES

- 2. Brushwyler, L. Ronald, “Letting Go: Setting Boundaries in Retirement and Former Parishes”, Midwest Ministry Development Service, 1997. Includes quote from Gaylord Noyce, *Pastoral Ethics: Professional Responsibilities of the Clergy*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988. (<http://www.midwestministry.org/letting-go.html>)

A. Ministerial Service

1. A pastor will not provide any type of ministerial service (in person, over the telephone, or on the internet) in a former parish following a call to another congregation, or after retiring or moving into another area of ministry or employment *unless specifically invited to do so by the current pastor*.³ Any request that comes to the former pastor from a former parishioner will be referred to the current pastor. Ministerial services include weddings, funerals, counseling, baptisms, child/family dedications, and other types of service normally reserved for the pastor of the congregation.
2. If the congregation does not have a pastor, the former pastor will not provide any type of ministerial service to that congregation without consultation and support of the District Executive/Minister acting on behalf of the Ministry Commission.⁴

B. Attendance and Membership

1. A pastor who remains in the neighborhood of the congregation after his/her ministerial service to that congregation has ended is urged, where feasible, to move his/her membership to another Church of the Brethren congregation.
2. A pastor may attend and hold membership in a former parish only under special circumstances (e.g., there is no Church of the Brethren congregation within a reasonable driving distance from one's home, or a personal/family situation warrants it). Under these special circumstances, the former pastor . . .
 - a. Shall have the approval of the District Ministry Commission;
 - b. Shall have the approval of the current pastor;⁵
 - c. Shall not provide any type of ministerial service in that congregation unless specifically invited to do so by the current pastor.

C. Communication

1. These guidelines are to be shared with all district offices, congregations, and licensed and ordained ministers in the Church of the Brethren. The departing pastor will present these guidelines to his/her congregation before leaving with the understanding that he/she will live by them when and if invitations are extended by anyone in the former parish. Development of

3. The current pastor may be an interim pastor.

4. District leaders may want to consult with the congregational leaders before granting permission.

5. Each time there is a pastoral change in the congregation.

a Covenant of Separation may be a useful process in assisting the congregation and departing pastor in defining the nature of the changing relationship. This covenant should clearly indicate the ending of the pastoral role and pastoral functions with that congregation and then shared with all members.

2. The current pastor and the former pastor are encouraged to develop healthy, respectful relationships including conversations about any concerns and issues related to the former pastor's membership and involvement. If concerns and issues cannot be resolved by these two people, the current pastor should consult with the District Executive/Minister, or with the District Ministry Commission in cases where the former pastor is the District Executive/Minister.

D. Additional Areas of Concern

While the purpose of this paper is to address *ministerial services* and *membership* of former pastors, there are other important matters that challenge us to think and act prayerfully, always seeking the best for the congregation as a whole and for each individual involved. The purpose of this section of these guidelines is meant to raise our level of sensitivity, not to set forth punitive statements.

1. *Friendships between former pastor and former parishioners.* The papers in 1988 and 1996, cited above, do not prohibit or restrict friendships with former parishioners. We value friendships highly in the life of the church, and they need not end because the pastor (and, in most cases, a pastoral family) has relocated and/or discontinued ministerial services to a particular congregation. It is the pastoral role and function that has come to an end. The responsibility for maintaining the relationship with former parishioners on a friendship level belongs to the former pastor. If the friendship interferes in any way with the ministry of the current pastor, the relationship must be changed or discontinued.
2. *College and retirement communities.* A second concern not discussed in the above papers is the concentration of large numbers of ministers in a particular congregation located near a Brethren college or retirement home (e.g., college and seminary professors, retired pastors/ministers, and retired District Executives/Ministers). The availability of such leadership is often a great blessing to any congregation, but it can also be a negative presence when the congregational leaders and the pastor feel overwhelmed and overpowered. Individuals who live in this type of situation are urged to use good judgment and careful discernment about what their presence means to the local church. It is especially important for these ministers to discuss their involvement in the congregation with the pastor and pay close attention to issues described in the Code of Ethics, letter Q.
3. *Former pastor's family.* A third concern is connected with the former pastor's family (spouse and/or children) after the pastor has discontinued ministerial service in a particular congregation. For example, a pastor may be called to become the District Executive/Minister in the district where the former parish is located, and his/her family may wish to attend and maintain membership in that congregation. The spiritual care and nurture of the former pastor's family must be seen as an important priority. An equally important priority is the health and welfare of the congregation. Sometimes these two priorities come into conflict. Families who find themselves in this type of situation must think and act prayerfully as they seek to discern what their presence means for themselves and for the well-being of the local church. As in other situations, it is especially important for family members of a former

pastor to discuss their involvement with the current pastor. If the presence of the family of the former pastor is uncomfortable for the current pastor or in any way leads to a controversy in the congregation, steps should be taken to resolve the issues. The people involved should seek resolution of the issues through conversations with the district Shalom Team, the District Executive/Minister, or the District Ministry Commission.

Selected Bibliography/Additional Resources

William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, Reading, PA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1980.

Gaylord Noyce, *Pastoral Ethics: Professional Responsibilities of the Clergy*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988.

Marilyn A. Peterson, *At Personal Risk: Boundary Violations in Professional-Client Relationships*, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992.

Wm. Bud Phillips, *Pastoral Transitions: From Endings to New Beginnings*, Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1988.

Edward A. White, *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors*, Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1990

Jules Z. Willing, *The Reality of Retirement: The Inner Experience of Becoming a Retired Person*, NY: William Morrow & Co., 1981.

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