

The Nature of Ministry in the United Church of Christ is such that strong and personal bonds are established between the pastor and members of the congregation. This situation can make retirement/resignation/ termination a difficult and traumatic experience. Bringing the pastoral relationships to a closure is a crucially important matter for the pastor, the members of the congregation, and the pastor's successor. The congregation and the new pastor need and deserve the opportunity to cultivate and nurture those same bonds and relationships that existed between the previous pastor and the congregation.

It has been confirmed that the pastor is the key person to set the tone for the closure of the pastoral relationships. The pastor who handles retirement/resignation/termination gracefully can become the "beloved former pastor," while the one who pursues the course of continuing involvement can destroy the very respect and strength that faithful work and dedication had established.

In statements and actions (public and private), both prior to and following retirement/resignation/termination, the pastor (and spouse) can very well establish the reality of a ministry that has been closed and completed, and can clear the way for the successor. The congregation also bears responsibility for ensuring that the transition from "active" to "retired/resigned/terminated" is accomplished smoothly and ethically. Members must avoid "holding onto" or "calling back" the retired/resigned/terminated pastor.

It has also been confirmed that moving away from the community in which the pastor has served makes the matter of ethics and proper relationships much easier to accomplish.

For the pastor who chooses to continue living in the community where she/he retired/resigned/terminated, making a complete break for an extended period of time has been shown to be helpful, i.e. an extended vacation, a planned sabbatical away from the church previously served.

Some Guidelines of Ethical Behavior:

1. Make a complete break from the church from which you are leaving, at least initially or as described above.
2. Be a true and loyal friend to your former congregation and its new pastor by refusing to engage in any pastoral function such as hospital calls, counseling, visitation, etc...
3. Many friendships may have been established while serving as the pastor of the church. Conducting weddings, funerals or other services for former members should be refused by any former pastor. Attending weddings, funerals, or other celebrations of those considered friends should be avoided.
4. Be an active member of the congregation of your choice. If you remain in the congregation formerly served, decline all offices and leadership positions.

Covenant of Closure for Departing Authorized Ministers

- 1 I will separate myself from participation in the life of the congregation from which I am departing. That separation shall begin with the date of resignation and last until at least one year after a settled pastor begins ministry. The total separation period shall be no less than 3 years.

- 2 I will be a true and loyal friend to my former congregation and to its new pastor by not making pastoral or hospital calls, or counseling with members, or presiding at weddings or funerals of former parishioners. I will also decline all offices and leadership positions in this congregation.

- 3 I will confer only with the Association Minister or the current pastor of this congregation about any problems I perceive in the congregation, and will not discuss them with members of this congregation or others.

- 4 I will communicate with the Association Minister should confusion, conflict, or other differences arise between this congregation and me.

- 5 If at the end of the agreed to period of time (see item #1) I wish to participate in this congregation, I will communicate such interests to the Association Minister who will facilitate discussion of this possibility with the congregation and its pastor. If such participation is deemed appropriate, a "Covenant for a New Ministry When the Former Pastor is Remaining in the Community" will be established.

- 6 I reaffirm my vows as an ordained pastor. Relying on the grace of God, I also reaffirm my commitment to the "Manual on Ministry" of the United Church of Christ.

Signed _____ Date _____

Witness for
the Congregation _____ Date _____

Witness for
the Association _____ Date _____