



## Introduction – Covenant for Departing Pastors

One of the most challenging aspects of pastoral ministry is when the time comes for a pastor to say good-bye to the congregation they have served. Pastors make connections with people that are very deep and profound. Pastors are invited into moments that are holy and intimate. There is grief on both sides when those relationships come to an end. But for the sake of the ministry of the congregation, there must be a clear ending to the pastoral relationship.

A pastor from the Northeastern Ohio Synod explained it this way to his congregation as he was preparing to retire:

Back at Northwestern Lutheran Seminary (LCA before the ELCA merger), Prof. Hulme taught students about empathic identification. Pastors are not to enmesh in the lives of parishioners, but are to feel parishioners' experiences alongside of them. So, pastors feel pain at funerals and joy at weddings. Pastors feel the excitement of learning and the commitment for social welfare.

It is because of the deep and profound nature of the human person that retiring pastors should go away. That way the interim pastor can prepare the congregation to form those new relationships with the new pastor. Perhaps no other "job" links people together the way being a pastor does. That is why the departure of one pastor is felt so deeply and why it takes time to form the next bond with the next pastor. But it does work. It does happen. It will happen here.

The "Covenant for Departing Pastors" on the following page honors this necessity for a definitive ending of the pastoral relationship with a congregation. In doing so, the pastor demonstrates professionalism and collegiality with their successor and other pastoral colleagues. The importance of this separation is recognized in the constitution of every ELCA synod:

Ministers of Word and Sacrament shall respect the integrity of the ministry of 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 no duly called pastor, then by the interim pastor in consultation with the Congregation Council.

(Constitution for Synods, †S14.19.)

The conduct expected of a pastor is spelled out in "Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline," a document that all ELCA rostered ministers pledge to follow. Among the many descriptions of conduct incompatible with the ministerial office is a section about the relationship to a prior congregation:

**Conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office** is grounds for discipline of rostered ministers. These guidelines define and describe kinds of behavior which are incompatible with the character of the ministerial office and may be grounds for discipline.

**Relationship with prior congregation(s) or ministry:** Rostered ministers who have resigned or retired from or otherwise no longer officially serve a congregation or other ministry shall honor the integrity of the congregation or ministry. They shall respect and honor the current rostered minister(s) and mission of the congregation or ministry they no longer are called to serve. They shall decline invitations from members to perform pastoral acts and refrain from asking members to directly or indirectly seek permission to perform such acts from the currently serving rostered minister. They shall not participate or interfere, whether personally or through a proxy, in the life of the congregation or ministry in any way, unless invited to participate by the current rostered minister(s) in conjunction with the congregation council or governing board. Such interference constitutes conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office or retirement status.

The covenant that follows is to be discussed by the departing pastor and the congregation council. Before the pastor's departure, the covenant is to be signed by the pastor and the congregation president or vice-president. The covenant should be entered into the minutes of the congregation council and a copy retained by both the pastor and the congregation. A copy of the signed covenant is to be sent to the Northeastern Ohio Synod where it will be kept in the file of the departing pastor and of the congregation.

It is incumbent upon both the pastor and the congregation council to communicate the expectations of this covenant to the whole congregation. Most congregation members do not understand the necessity of this termination of a pastoral relationship and can unwittingly put the departing pastor or the new pastor in a very difficult position by asking that the departing pastor engage in pastoral acts or other behavior that is precluded by the covenant. A sample communication to the congregation is included below.

Please note that this covenant does not affect or require termination of friendships with individuals who are members of the congregation. Such relationships are especially meaningful for retiring pastors who remain in the community. At the same time, the proximity of a retired pastor can make it challenging to adhere to the expectations of this covenant, therefore all parties must be made fully aware of the content of the covenant.

If there are any questions regarding this covenant and the expectations contained therein, how the covenant is to be upheld, or appropriate communication to the congregation, please contact the Northeastern Ohio Synod and the bishop or a member of their staff will be happy to consult with you.

## Covenant for Departing Pastors

It has been my privilege to serve the mission and ministry of [*church name*] Lutheran Church as Pastor since [*start date or year*]. As God called me for a time to serve among you, God now calls me forth to serve in a new way, in a new place, among a new people – even as we remain one in the body of Christ.

In prayerful conversation with the Congregation Council of [*church name*] Lutheran Church, I have discussed the policies and expectations of the Northeastern Ohio Synod and of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America regarding departing pastors, and I enter into the following covenant.

I agree:

- to pray for the ongoing mission of the congregation and for their new pastor;
- to communicate to the congregation, in writing and in conversation, the terms of this covenant, which terminates our pastoral relationship;
- to not be involved in any leadership or advisory role (public or private) in this congregation and to refrain from behaviors that seek in any way to influence or control the transition process, including any attempt to influence the call of a successor;
- to refrain from language or behavior that could undermine the development of the relationship between the congregation and their new pastor, regardless of whether it is an interim or called successor;
- to not support or give advice to anyone involved in a congregational disagreement;
- to promptly refuse requests for pastoral services made by members of the congregation (including but not limited to baptisms, weddings, funerals, anniversaries, and visiting the sick and homebound), except as invited by the current pastor;
- to consult with the current pastor regarding my attendance at worship and any events of the congregation;
- to encourage my family members to support me in maintaining this covenant and to support the ministry of the congregation's new pastor.

*[Other items may be added that are consistent with the particular relationship and mission of this congregation and pastor].*

It is understood that this covenant does not affect or require termination of friendships with individuals who are members of this congregation.

Signature of Pastor: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Witnessed by President: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Sample Communication to the Congregation

*this would be appropriate to share soon after the departure of the pastor*

Dear members and friends of [*church name*] Lutheran Church,

As you are aware, Pastor [*name*] concluded their ministry with us on [*effective date*]. The congregation council and Pastor [*name*] have discussed the importance of the termination of a pastor's relationship with a congregation upon a pastor's departure. In recognition of this, we have signed a "Covenant for Departing Pastors" as provided by the Northeastern Ohio Synod.

Such a covenant is necessary to emphasize the termination of the pastoral relationship with the congregation so that an appropriate pastoral relationship may develop with the next pastor. To help the congregation understand the expectations of this covenant, we want to share that Pastor [*name*] has pledged:

- to not be involved in any leadership or advisory role (public or private) in this congregation and to refrain from behaviors that seek in any way to influence or control the transition process, including any attempt to influence the call of a successor;
- to refrain from language or behavior that could undermine the development of the relationship between the congregation and their new pastor, regardless of whether it is an interim or called successor;
- to not support or give advice to anyone involved in a congregational disagreement;
- to promptly refuse requests for pastoral services made by members of the congregation (including but not limited to baptisms, weddings, funerals, anniversaries, and visiting the sick and homebound), except as invited by the current pastor;
- to consult with the current pastor regarding my attendance at worship and any events of the congregation;
- to encourage my family members to support me in maintaining this covenant and to support the ministry of the congregation's new pastor.

It is important that we as members of [*church name*] honor this covenant by not asking Pastor [*name*] to do anything that would be in violation of this covenant. We recognize that this will be difficult for all of us, but if we were to approach Pastor [*name*] or their successor with such a request, it would put them in a very awkward position.

It is important to note that the covenant does not preclude personal friendships. Pastor [*name*] and their family may remain friends with members of the congregation. The covenant simply recognizes and underscores that Pastor [*name*] will no longer be our pastor and will not engage in any pastoral acts or exert any influence in the congregation.

Your Congregation Council