

**ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF PASTOR AND CONGREGATION  
(When a Pulpit Becomes Vacant)**

One of the most important relationships Christians have is that between parishioner and pastor. This relationship is comparable to a family one, especially when pastoral relationships are long and the bonds of affection run deep between a congregation and the pastor who has been with them during times of crisis and of joy. It is very difficult for church members to understand that the relationship must change significantly when a pastor accepts a call to serve elsewhere or retires and that they must share their faith journey with another pastor whom God has called to fill that role. It is also difficult for the departing pastor, and especially for the retiring pastor, who has devoted so much of his or her life to ministry. As retirement is a challenging transition for all working people, it is more so in a profession where work and identity are so closely bound.

The Book of Order makes the following statement: *Former pastors, associate pastors, and assistant pastors may officiate at services for members of a particular church, or at services within its properties, only upon invitation from the moderator of the session or, in case of the inability to contact the moderator, from the clerk of session.*

Nothing more really needs to be added. We all know, human nature being as it is, the following is needed to be directed by the Presbytery of Eastern Virginia through its Committee on Ministry:

**TO THE SESSION OF THE CHURCH:** The Session should read and/or distribute this paper to the congregation, urging them to “let go” of the former pastor. It is the session’s responsibility to use its discretion as to how best to help the congregation to make this transition.

**TO THE CONGREGATION:** Church members should not request or expect any pastoral functions from the former pastor. It is embarrassing for the former pastor and is not ethically proper for members of the congregation to make request of their former pastor. It is best for all concerned that the interim pastor and/or the newly installed pastor be the person to whom members of the congregation turn to for their pastoral needs.

**TO THE DEPARTING PASTOR:** Remember you are no longer the pastor and that you must abide by the Book of Order. Before you depart, advise the congregation of the change that is to take place in your relationship.

**TO THE RETIRING PASTOR:** Remember you are no longer the pastor and that you must abide by the Book of Order. Before you retire, advise the congregation of the change that is to take place in your relationship. If you continue to live in the same area, it is advisable for you and your spouse to refrain from attending regular worship for a period of time, even after the new pastor is installed.

**TO THE STATED SUPPLY AND/OR THE INTERIM PASTOR:** Remember the former pastor is a colleague in ministry, not a rival. You are present to help the congregation and the former pastor who remains in the community through this period of adjustment. Be sensitive to the situation and the needs of both parties.

**TO THE NEW INSTALLED PASTOR:** Remember that the former pastor is your colleague in ministry, not a rival, and you follow a person who meant much to this congregation and to whom the

congregation meant much to her/him. Do not be overly sensitive to the congregation and their memories of this person. You will enhance your own chances of the love and respect that person had by the congregation by becoming that person's friend, especially if that person remains in the community. If you should for some reason have a problem with this person's presence, discuss it with her/him.

**TO THE PASTORS OF PRESBYTERY:** When a pastor retires and remains a member of the presbytery, you should reach out to this person and invite her/him and their spouse to worship in the church where you serve. That person can become a source of help for you!

**TO THE PRESBYTERY:** The Presbytery should be much more sensitive to assisting its retired pastors in making this transition in their life. The Nominating Committee should use these persons to serve on various committees. The Committee on Ministry should encourage these persons to pursue being Stated Supplies, Occasional Supplies and Interim Pastors. The Presbytery should officially recognize that the retired pastors meet for fellowship on a quarterly basis and should connect this group officially to the Care and Support Committee.