
*Windham Association of the
Connecticut Conference of the
United Church of Christ*

Recommendations for Retired Ministers and Their Churches

Adopted December 2012

The recommendations for retired ministers and their churches outlined below rise of a study conducted by the Committee for Authorized Ministry and Church Standing of the Windham Association of the CT Conference of the United Church of Christ. This study consisted of a series of interviews with retired ministers, both settled and interim.

Preface

The departure of a beloved minister from a congregation that he or she has served for several to many years can be a painful process for both the minister and the parishioners. In some cases congregations are best served by the opportunity to work through their sadness during an interim period of transition. At the same time a pastor's decision to retire may be cause for celebration for both the pastor, who looks forward to retirement, and the church which celebrates their pastor's upcoming retirement while recognizing the opportunity to reassess its mission and ministry. In such cases the congregation will not require a prolonged period of grieving. *Because each retirement situation is unique, how the pastor and the church responds should also be unique and tailored to its own particular circumstances.*

When defining the appropriate boundaries between the parishioners, the departing minister, and the incoming pastor the pastor's reason for retiring and his or her relationship with the church including the pastor's demonstrated ability or inability to respect boundaries should be considered.

A. The Relationship between the Retired Minister and the Church

1. Severing the relationship between the congregation and the retired minister was noted as extremely painful for all parties involved. Nevertheless, it was recommended that the minister not participate in church activities and worship for at least one year. Some retired pastors recommended that the retired minister change their church membership. It was noted that the physical absence of the retired minister from the community of faith facilitates boundary adherence, makes the transition clearer, and may even make it easier for everyone involved. Hopefully the retiring pastor knows themselves well enough to identify the degree of separation to maintain (i.e., how able they are at maintaining boundaries or "letting go of their former pastoral roles").
2. It was noted that it is imperative for the retired minister to set his or her personal boundaries relative to the church and to have a clear understanding of what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior when contact with church members/friends occurs. For example, going out for a cup of coffee with a church member with the explicit boundary of not discussion church business would be appropriate. It was recommended further that the retired pastor have a planned response when a former parishioner invites the retired minister to serve in some ministerial capacity (i.e., perform a wedding, funeral,

baptism at the church). Suggested replies were: “I’m retired now” or “You will have to consult with the new minister.” In the case of complaints being leveled by a disgruntled parishioner one response could be “I am out of the loop now.”

3. If a retired minister is asked by a family to perform a funeral, it was advised that the retired minister consult with the new pastor and if welcomed to participate, to take on a minor role such as doing a eulogy but not officiate. It was also suggested that the retired minister notify the local funeral home(s) informing them of their retirement and the boundaries he or she will be following relative to the death of a church member whose funeral/memorial service is held at that funeral home in the future. It would be advisable for the funeral home to have a prepared response if the family of the deceased requests the former pastor to officiate the service.
4. There was much conversation around the designation of Pastor Emeritus. One concern was the confusion created for parishioners when a former pastor is designated as Pastor Emeritus and appears at worship. Parishioners may misinterpret his or her presence as granting continued authority and spiritual/pastoral leadership at the church. Again it was suggested that a period of separation prior to the pastor’s return would be helpful. Some maintain that the granting of such status should take place after one year or after the hiring of the next settled pastor. However, church’s whose pastors have served admirably often wish to confer the title of Pastor Emeritus upon a retiring pastor at the time of his/her departure as a way of honoring their recent ministry. It was clear that a church’s discernment over whether or not to grant emeritus status at the time of the retirement should depend in part upon the departing pastor’s understanding and recognition that the designation of Pastor Emeritus is an honorary title only and does not grant permission to reengage oneself in the leadership and ministries of the church.
5. The retired minister should be respectful of the fact that the incoming pastor “deserves” the opportunity to “endear him or herself to the congregation without the retired minister constantly on the scene.”
6. Prior to the retirement taking place the Church Council or a designated committee of the church should hold an exit interview with the retiring pastor. At that interview any outstanding concerns or grievances should be voiced, acknowledged, and hopefully reconciled. Additionally, the departing minister should be encouraged to share his or her recommendations regarding concerns or actions the church should consider addressing in the future. As well the boundaries to which both parties have agreed to should be reviewed.
7. In the event the newly retired minister suffers health complications or a personal crisis, it is the recommendation of this Committee on Ministry that the minister contact his or her regional minister who can serve as a resource for spiritual sustenance, assistance, and support.

B. Communication with the Church

1. The minister’s decision to retire should be communicated to the Church Council and the Pastoral Relations Committee or Board of Deacons. It is incumbent upon these committees and boards with input from the pastor to arrive at an understanding and agreement as to when the retirement will take place and what the future boundaries between the minister and the church/congregation will look like.
2. A letter from the minister should be sent to all church members notifying them of his/her decision to retire. Included in that letter should be a statement describing what the pastor’s relationship with the congregation/church will upon retirement and for the first year or years following his/her retirement.

3. With sensitivity towards how notification of the pastor's retirement will be received, the Church Council and Pastoral Relations Committee or Board of Deacons should issue a written statement to all members of the church (both active and inactive) detailing how the relationship between church members and friends of the congregation and the retired minister will change, and just as important, why these changes are necessary and how they are to be carried out by all parties. This statement should be publicized widely: read to the congregation, printed in the church newsletter, placed as an insert to the bulletin, posted on the church website, and issued to members' emails. This change in relationship should be reviewed as part of the Service of Closure or Recognition of Ministry in honor of the retiring minister.

C. Relationship between the Retired and the Interim or Settled Pastor

1. During our interviews we talked about the awkwardness which is created when the retired minister becomes a parishioner and when for the new minister has the retired minister as part of the congregation.
2. All agreed that if the retired minister is to have any role in a service, funeral, baptism or wedding that it must be agreed to by the current pastor and should be a secondary role. It was noted that often such arrangements have worked out beautifully and proven to be of great comfort and delight to the families involved.
3. Several incoming pastors stated how much they appreciated the opportunity to converse with the retired pastor at the beginning of their pastorate in order to learn about the congregation and its life. This conversation(s) may provide the opportunity for each to come to an agreement over the boundaries to be respected. Many pastors indicated that over the years they have developed strong friendships with either the new pastor or the retired pastor.
4. Some ministers expressed frustration in those instances when the retired pastor insisted upon remaining active in the church from which they have retired. This was reported wherein retired pastors were making administrative decisions or conducting ministerial services without notification to the present minister. Was a review of boundaries lacking? Did the pastor conclude that the boundaries did not apply to them? Or does the minister have difficulty maintaining appropriate boundaries overall? If the new pastor feels uncomfortable about or unable to confront the prior minister, he or she should consult with the Committee on Ministry of their association. The COM should take an active role in helping resolve the situation.

D. Role of the Committee on Ministry

The point at which a Committee on Ministry learns about an upcoming retirement they will take an active role in the following ways:

1. The COM will contact the minister and the Church Council where he or she currently serves to be sure that both the minister and a governing body of the church has a copy of this document, *Recommendations for Retired Ministers and Their Churches* to use as a guideline to concluding their relationship as minister and congregation.
2. The COM will conduct an exit interview with the retiring minister to discuss the boundaries that have been agreed to between the church and the minister and the importance of adhering to these boundaries.

3. The COM will conduct an interview with the incoming pastor and review this document, the boundaries that the church and retiring minister intend to follow, and the incoming pastor's critical role in assuring the implementation of the boundaries designated.
4. In the event that the boundaries are crossed or disregarded by the retiring minister, the congregation, or the interim or settled pastor, the COM will take an active role to address the breach and assist in reestablishing the desired relationship.

To close, again we state our belief that each retirement scenario and congregation are different. The decisions made regarding acceptable boundaries between the departing minister, the congregation, and the incoming minister (interim or settled) must be reviewed carefully and prayerfully so that they will work to everyone's best interest and allow for the church to continue its ministry and mission to serve God and God's people.