

HEALTHY BOUNDARIES IN RETIREMENT

An ordained minister in retirement is one who is not regularly serving in a ministry setting, due to age or inability to serve.¹ As ordained ministers, retirees may continue to hold Ordained Ministerial Standing in the United Church of Christ and thus continue to represent the Church and the Gospel in both formal and informal situations. They also continue to participate in all forms of accountability and oversight with their Association's Committee on Ministry, unless they have requested and been granted Omega Standing. Many retired ministers continue to answer God's call through generous service on boards and committees for Associations, Conferences, and other settings of the church. They often provide grace-full leadership for pulpit supply, occasional worship in congregational or other settings, weddings, funerals, or other church services in congregations or other settings.

All ordained ministers must be responsible in establishing and maintaining healthy and appropriate boundaries in their ministries. Those professionally "retired" have particular responsibilities in their congregation of membership. Their role, responsibilities, and accountability may not be immediately clear to others, or even to themselves. Therefore, "retired" ministers must exercise particular vigilance in establishing, maintaining, and communicating healthy boundaries in all cases.

Ministers retiring from a congregation must pay particular and careful attention to establishing appropriate and clear boundaries with their congregation and parishioners in order to facilitate the church's ability to build a positive relationship with the minister's successor and to continue to be faithful to the church's mission. Establishing such boundaries will also serve the retiring minister by providing a sense of release and clarity regarding the new status. All Ordained Ministers and Members in Discernment with Limited Standing will continue to abide faithfully by the Ministerial Code of Ethics.

¹ So long as one is engaged in ministry, whether while drawing on one's pension or annuity, whether part-time or full-time, whether as an interim or supply or sabbatical pastor or something else, the Committee on Ministry considers the minister to be active in ministry.

We suggest the following healthy boundary practices for ministers in retirement:

1. CHURCH BOUNDARIES²:

- a) The minister, upon departing from the last ministry setting, will leave with grace, expressing gratitude for the time of shared ministry and encouraging the congregation to bond with its next minister.
- b) The retiring minister will state clearly that they are no longer available to the congregation or related persons for any ministerial services, including weddings, baptisms, funerals, church activities, pastoral care. The minister will keep this commitment, even when pressured to disregard it.
- c) The retiring minister will say “goodbye” through an exit interview and through worship³ – and then practice saying “hello” to the new reality of retirement.
- d) The retiring minister will transfer their local church membership (and ministerial standing, if appropriate) upon their departure from a congregation at the point of retirement. This will facilitate both the retired minister and the congregation in building vital new relationships. If the retiring minister is remaining in a community they have served prior to their retirement, it is the best practice for the minister not to participate in the life of that church for a period of 1-3 years, determined in conversation with the local Committee on Ministry and the incoming minister.⁴

² Regardless of exceptions that may be made and nuances that may be relevant to distinct ministry settings, boundaries for a minister’s departure or transition should be discussed with a Committee on Ministry so that the overseeing body can support and hold accountable the minister during a season of change. We encourage the minister to make use of the guidance from the resource “The Minister’s Exit Tasks,” found on page 56 of the Conference User Guide: UCC Search and Call Tools, available here: <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/User-Guide.pdf>.

³ The UCC *Book of Worship* has a Liturgy for Departure that begins on page 252.

⁴ See *A Brief Dictionary of Pastoral Positions*, developed by the Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization (MESA) Ministry team with judicatory staff, December 2014.

- e) Any ordained minister who is not the pastor of the congregation of membership will carefully choose how to be active in that church. Any act of ministry usually performed by clergy may be undertaken only at the express invitation of the pastor. When *any* potential conflict of role or responsibility or perception seems possible, the minister will seek the counsel of the pastor before proceeding to become involved. Some roles normally filled by lay members may be inappropriate for an ordained minister. At the same time, the retiree may become a gift to the congregation and pastor as s/he participates helpfully and appropriately.

2. COMMUNITY BOUNDARIES:

- a) The authorized minister will inform nursing homes or other care facilities that they are no longer available for Bible study, worship services, or other pastoral duties following their departure date.
- b) The authorized minister will inform area funeral homes that they are no longer available for funerals or memorial services following their departure date. They should request funeral directors to direct requests to the new pastor of the congregation.
- c) When the authorized minister's portfolio has included specialized duties (e.g. Minister of Music or Minister of Social Justice), the minister will inform organizations with whom the minister partnered that they will no longer be available and encourage those settings to invite the incoming minister's participation.
- d) The authorized minister will inform any other settings where they have done general community ministry (such as city council meetings, service clubs, service or advocacy organizations, ecumenical partnerships) that they will no longer offer pastoral services (such as guest preaching, opening/closing prayers, musical leadership) following their departure date, and encourage those settings to invite the incoming minister's participation.
- e) The authorized minister will resign from any area or community positions held by virtue of their position.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA BOUNDARIES⁵:

- a) Prior to departure, the authorized minister will transfer administrator duties, remove their own administrator status, and share password information with an appropriate person (usually an officer or staff member appointed by the Council) in the congregation for all ministry-related pages, groups and accounts.
- b) Unfriending/unfollowing parishioners and others with whom they've had a pastoral relationship is the strongly preferred practice, although there may be situations where moving to a restricted list is appropriate.⁶ Ministers must prioritize the needs of the congregation and incoming ministerial leadership over their own desires to maintain relationships (or the desires of parishioners to stay in contact). Ministers must be consistent: either unfriend/unfollow *everyone* from that setting, or move *all* to a restricted list. Ministers will communicate this policy to their congregation as part of their departure plan so that there is no confusion.
- c) Ministers will completely refrain from providing pastoral care through digital communication after the end date of their contract/call/covenant with their former congregation. Continuing to provide pastoral care through social media interferes with the ministry of one's successor and is a violation of the Minister's Code of Ethics.
- d) Following a period of 1-3 years, ministers may discern whether they will begin to accept friend requests of former parishioners and/or change their privacy settings. Ministers will not initiate friend/follow requests with former parishioners and will continue to refrain from providing pastoral care to former parishioners through digital communication, including on an "informal" basis.

⁵ This section comes from the MESA Resource "Social Media and Boundaries for Authorized Ministers," and includes information from the Connecticut Conference's resource, "Internet Safety Guidelines," which is available here: <http://www.ctucc.org/resources/onlinesafetyguidelines.html>.

⁶ Adam Cleaveland makes compelling arguments for both options here: <https://alban.org/archive/pastoral-transitions-in-the-age-of-social-media/>

4. COMMITTEE ON MINISTRY BOUNDARIES:

- a) When planning retirement, ministers must be in touch with the Committee on Ministry to alert the Committee to the anticipated change in status and to consult with the Committee about the Association's expectations in that process. They will explore with the Committee what peer groups or other resources are available for retired clergy in the area to help them understand their new ministry calling in retirement and to continue to live healthy, robust, and self-differentiated lives.
- b) Retired ministers with Ordained Ministerial Standing, unless they hold "Omega Standing," are obligated to maintain the covenant obligations of Standing, including boundary training, continuing education, information review, participation in the life of the UCC and keeping the Code of Ministerial Ethics.

PASTOR EMERITUS/EMERITA

When a pastor retires and is given the honorary title "Pastor Emeritus/Emerita," it must be clear that such a title is in recognition of exceptional service in a ministry setting and a sign of that congregation's high regard for the retired minister. The role of a "Pastor Emerita/Emeritus," and any attendant responsibilities or expectations, should be named explicitly and negotiated at regular intervals. In most cases, a "Pastor Emeritus/Emerita" title is honorary and confers no pastoral responsibilities or expectations. In some contexts, the role of a retired minister or a Pastor Emerita/Emeritus is understood in different and very specific ways. Sensitivity to the cultural norms of a community, healthy boundaries, and clarity of the relationship require careful and continuing attention.

OMEGA STANDING

A minister who is professionally retired and no longer engaging in any service of ordained ministry, may request their Committee on Ministry to grant them Omega Standing.

Omega Standing indicates that an ordained minister has completed their ministerial career and entered a covenant with their Committee on Ministry no longer to engage in any service of ministry – including entering into call agreements, officiating at weddings or funerals, presiding over sacraments. Omega Standing is not related to an ordained minister’s professional retirement or pension status.

If granted Omega Standing, the ordained minister may be released from the obligations of Standing such as boundary training and continuing education. The ordained minister’s covenant to disengage from all acts of ministry must be documented and entered in the UCC Data Hub. Omega Standing can be held in an association separate from one’s local church of membership; if an ordained minister with Omega Standing wishes to reengage in any service of ministry, that minister must request reinstatement of good standing from the same Committee on Ministry that granted Omega Standing.