



## **CALLED TO BE A BLESSING: A GUIDE FOR HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AMONG CREDENTIALLED PERSONS**

Credentialed persons<sup>1</sup> who are not in official leadership positions in a congregation which they attend have gifts to offer to the church's mission and ministry. They also need the ministry of the church. Our call as leaders is to empower and bless each other to serve God in and through the church.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of these guidelines is to promote healthy relationships among credentialed persons in Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC) so that all can receive from and contribute to the church's ministry and mission.

These guidelines are not intended to address every possible situation. However, it is hoped they will:

- 1) assist congregations to include credentialed persons and their families in the life and ministry of the congregation, both as contributors and recipients.
- 2) guide credentialed persons to offer their gifts of leadership, counsel and caring in ways that respect the vision and mission of the congregation and its designated leaders.

The value and success of these guidelines are predicated on three things:

- a) good communication,
- b) good will, and
- c) good manners (etiquette, ethics in ministry).

### **Basic Principles**

Designated pastors and others charged with pastoral care in the congregation are responsible for ensuring that pastoral and spiritual needs of credentialed persons and their family members are addressed. This includes helping them find ways to participate appropriately in the church's life and mission, as they exercise the authority which comes with responsibility.

The onus is on the former credentialed person to maintain appropriate boundaries. They should contact and clarify expectations and seek direction from the designated pastor(s) and congregational leaders when asked to perform pastoral functions or offer pastoral care.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Credentialed persons' includes ordained lay ministers and pastors who are retired, who are in specialized ministry, or who have moved on to serve in other congregations, and those who are inactive or between assignments. Also included are Area Church Ministers, Regional Ministers, returned missionaries, and pastors on parental leave or sabbatical.

Normally questions about such matters are best addressed among those directly involved. Regional Ministers can assist in these conversations. Concerns regarding ethical conduct, theology or performance of a colleague should be addressed to the Church Leadership Minister or Leadership Council.

## **Polity Manual**

At licensing and ordination, all pastors commit themselves to ethical behaviour and mutual accountability with the wider church and other congregational leaders according to the guidelines set out in *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership* (Polity manual). An attitude of humility and a commitment to open communication and spiritual discernment between credentialed persons and their pastor builds trust and enriches the collegial relationship as well as the congregation's ministry.

MCEC encourages the use of the document "A Covenant Regarding Ethics in Ministry" which is signed when a person assumes a pastoral assignment. Likewise, the *Called to be a Blessing* guide should be used in conjunction with exit interviews of pastors who are retiring, or moving on to another assignment.

## **The Role of Former Pastors**

The Polity manual states that "when the pastoral assignment is finished... the pastor gives the former congregation and its new leader space to form a new pastor-congregation relationship. The former pastor exercises great sensitivity to his/her successor and refrains from returning to the congregation to provide leadership" (59). Likewise, church leadership ministers are encouraged to disengage from the area church in which they served and refrain from taking assignments which may frustrate the successor's attempts to minister. This applies also to Regional Ministers and other regional church staff.

The Polity manual further acknowledges that there will be situations when it is not possible or practical for a former pastor to leave the congregation or regional church. In such cases, the encouragement is to arrange for direct conversation between the former pastor and present leaders of the congregation, including the pastor. The former pastor is discouraged from attending church activities for the first 12 months of the new long-term pastor's ministry, but encouraged to be a part of an accountability group "to help navigate the former pastor's new relationship with the congregation in a way that respects and supports the new pastor's transition into the congregation" (59).

Some congregations designate a former pastor as "pastor emeritus." This title and role gives that person a clear but limited mandate for how he/she might occasionally perform certain ministerial tasks in the congregation. An accountability group can help manage the "pastor emeritus" stage of ministry. The pastor emeritus may meet on occasion with the pastor(s) of the congregation. A written covenant helps to clarify and guide these relationships.

## **1. Covenant when a previous pastor leaves the congregation**

A covenant when a pastor is leaving the community might include the following:

- a) A commitment for the departing pastor and the congregation to pray for each other during the time of transition.
- b) An agreement to provide information to leaders during the months following a transition, if requested. This includes factual data, not material that was shared in confidence.
- c) A statement that the departing pastor will not return to provide ministry or that describes the conditions and process by which such ministry might be appropriate.
- d) A statement that by his/her words and actions both in public and private, the departing pastor will seek to build up the incoming pastor's leadership.
- e) A statement identifying the arrangements that have been made for pastoral care in the event of a crisis or death during the period between pastors.

## **2. Covenant when a previous pastor stays in the congregation**

When a pastor remains in the congregation after resigning, the covenant may include:

- a) An agreement to meet regularly with an accountability group (perhaps every 4-6 months, including in the first year or two after the new long-term pastor begins) to monitor how things are going and to deal with situations as they arise.
- b) An agreement to deal with concerns directly or in the accountability group.
- c) A clarification of the process by which the previous pastor may agree to participate in congregational life, assuming that involvement in public leadership roles would be rare and exceptional, especially in the first year or two.
- d) An understanding about attending and participation in business and other decision-making meetings. Erring on the side of caution is recommended.
- e) An understanding about who will attend to the pastoral and spiritual needs of the previous pastor and his/her family members.
- f) Where the spouse has been an active partner in the pastor's ministry, some clarification about his/her ongoing involvement in congregational life.

### **3. When a credentialed person participates but is not the pastor**

Credentialed persons who are in specialized ministry, between assignments or retired exercise discretion and care in the way they participate in church life, even when they have never been the pastor in that congregation. By their words and actions, they seek to support and build up the ministry of the congregation and its pastors.

Such persons are encouraged to have some form of accountability relationship to the congregation in which they are a member. One way of doing this is to report periodically to a designated body in the existing congregational structure or to a specially appointed accountability group. In addition to addressing matters relating to the person's functioning in the congregation, such an accountability group could be a place to address questions of spiritual, emotional or relational health as it affects their status and function as a credentialed minister.

### **4. When credentialed persons are asked to perform pastoral functions in a congregation where they are not the pastor**

Credentialed persons are sometimes invited to perform official functions such as weddings or funerals for persons participating in a congregation where they are not the pastor. There is the possibility that former pastors who return to provide ministerial functions can unintentionally undermine the ministry of the current pastor. Relationships are complex in significance and meaning, so there may be reasons why people - whether former congregant or family member - want to invite another pastor to perform a ministerial function. Conversely, if a previous pastor prefers not to perform such ministry, the on-site pastor can be a broker for this conversation.

Generally speaking, current pastors want to be gracious in welcoming the participation of other credentialed persons who are significant to the family. To do that respectfully, it is important to follow good process.

The couple/family should speak first with the current pastor about their desire to include another credentialed person in the service. This would give the pastor an opportunity to learn of the significance of that relationship and discuss with the couple/family an appropriate way of involving this credentialed person. The pastor would then extend an invitation to the credentialed person and discuss his/her role in the service as negotiated with the couple/family.

Persons in nursing homes often receive spiritual ministry from the nursing home chaplain as well as the pastor of their home congregation. Often the home chaplain is asked to take part in funeral services of nursing home residents. Normally the congregational pastor takes primary responsibility for this service, and arranges for participation of the chaplain as requested by the family.

Before agreeing to any invitation, the credentialed person, in respect of the current pastor's ministry, must discuss with the pastor the appropriateness of his/her role in the planning, preparation and/or participation in the public service. The role of the credentialed person will

be determined at the discretion of the current pastor in conversation with the couple/family. Ultimately what is desired is a meaningful service for all.

### **Conclusion**

The intention of these practices is to help all to live out their calling in such a way that each part “works properly [and] promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love” (Ephesians 4:16, NRSV).