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Pastoral Ethics and Social Media – Particularly Facebook

Clergy in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) have had explicit ethical expectations since the 1940s when the first “Code of Ethics” was promulgated by the then-Division of Homeland Ministries. Over the years that Code has undergone several revisions and is now titled “My Ministerial Code of Ethics”; the current version can be found [here](#). What those revisions could not adequately anticipate was the tremendous growth of social media – particularly, but hardly exclusively, Facebook -- and how that should affect the way the Code ought to be interpreted and lived out by pastors.

There are several injunctions in the Code that directly relate to a minister’s ethical obligations and opportunities, particularly as they relate to one’s dealings with a predecessor or successor; this one is particularly relevant to social media:

Encouraging the ministry of my successor upon my retirement or other departure from a ministry position, without interfering or intruding, and by making it clear to former parishioners that I am no longer their pastor nor will I perform any pastoral services unless requested by the congregation’s current pastor and elders.

Before offering some guidelines for interaction on social media, it is essential to note that a minister has “friends” or “followers” from a former congregation ONLY because there was a previous pastoral relationship. These folks would not be “friends” unless they were first parishioners. Therefore one must carefully interact with these folks so as to not “interfere or intrude” on the current pastor’s role, and so as to not – even if unintentionally – “perform pastoral services” for someone who is no longer a parishioner. Online communities like Facebook and Instagram ARE real communities and a pastor can hurt his or her successor’s ministry and church community by not carefully thinking through one’s ways of participating.

With that in mind, we propose the following rules for social media as regards the relationship between a pastor and his or her predecessor in a church:

1. A common rule-of thumb is that departing pastors should absent themselves from the congregation for a year. This is also an excellent rule for social media interaction. The departing pastor need not go so far as to “un-friend” (viz. Facebook) their soon-to-be-former parishioners but should make it abundantly clear (and do so more than once!) that there will be no interaction on Facebook, Instagram, etc., for at least a year. Such an announcement must also always be made in terms of the positive value of the new minister bonding and not with the negative message that “the rules make me do this.”

2. The former rule should be followed even if the arriving pastor graciously says to the departing pastor that he or she doesn't mind if the soon-to-be-former pastor interacts with church members. The arriving pastor may simply not be aware of how much his or her ministry can be undercut – and how much bonding can fail to occur – when via social media the departing pastor makes too many “frequent visits to a former field” (as the 1944 Code put it).

3. When a mutually satisfactory time has passed as primarily determined by the new pastor in consultation with the congregation's Elders and Regional Minister, the former minister may begin carefully interacting with former parishioners. In terms of Facebook, this means the former minister never “likes” or comments on a former parishioner's post (that is asking for prayer or conveying a personal situation) until and unless the current minister has done so. And this also means paying attention to time zones; if the departed minister is in the far eastern U.S. and the current minister is on the Pacific coast, the former will always see posts first – and must refrain from commenting on or “liking,” until the pastor has done so. Failing to refrain from such interactions can well mean that the departed pastor is in fact “performing pastoral services” – to the detriment of the congregation and its pastor.

4. When a pastor departs, he or she should never, ever say – either aloud or on social media – that he or she can return (either in-person or on social media) when it's okay with the new pastor. This is utterly inappropriate and puts the new pastor in the role of the “bad guy.”

5. To this point, we've pointed out some ways we see social media, primarily represented by Facebook, as having the potential for former pastors to harm new pastor's establishing his or her relationships in a new parish. But we also know it can be helpful as well. Former pastors can be “blessers” of the new ministry via social media. Reposting events, announcements, celebrations or congratulations with the prior permission of the pastor in order to be a “cheerleader” for the ministry is entirely appropriate. Commentary on the re-posts beyond a brief “yay-team” is not. But it is our experience that both the pastors and congregations we have left appreciate knowing we see and care about what they continue to do in Jesus' name.