

**SYNOD TOGETHER 12 MARCH 2016  
EAST CROYDON UNITED REFORMED CHURCH**

**CONDUCT OF MINISTERS:  
THE ROLE OF RETIRED/FORMER MINISTERS IN LOCAL PASTORATES  
PRESENTATION BY SOUTHERN SYNOD MINISTRIES COMMITTEE**

In 2010, GA issued Guidelines on Conduct and Behaviour for Ministers of Word and Sacrament, including a section on *Relationships with ministerial colleagues*, quoted below:

All Ministers:

- To consider very carefully taking any position of responsibility in a pastorate served by another minister and to support the direction of church life initiated through the leadership of the pastorate.
- To respect the work of predecessors and successors and deal honourably with their record.
- To consider carefully the location of retirement housing and try to avoid living in the immediate area of past pastorates.

Ministers in pastoral charge:

- To support the ministry of other ministers and not interfere with the conduct of ministry or the direction of church life of other pastorates.
- To sever all professional ties with a previous pastorate and refer any requests or enquiries of previous pastorates to the interim moderator or new minister.

Despite the many warm and mutually supportive relationships that exist between currently serving Ministers and their colleagues, ministers in pastoral charge of a local congregation can find themselves called upon to deal with “delicate” situations, such as:

- (a) the role of a former minister, now retired but still living nearby;
- (b) the role of a former minister, now serving elsewhere, but who forged many strong pastoral links with current church members, who would like him/her still to be involved in their lives;
- (c) the role of a retired minister, with no former service in this particular church but now a church member and of somewhat differing views to one’s own, some of which are shared by members of the congregation;
- (d) the role of other ministers who happen to be friends of church members and so “*is it alright if our friend conducts our wedding/funeral and not you?*”
- (e) relationships with other colleagues in a team ministry, when church members/ adherents ask for a specific member of the team to perform a pastoral service for them

Two underlying issues are:

(1) CALL

Ministers of the URC are called by a congregation/ group of congregations to be the Minister of that particular Pastorate. By issuing a call from the church membership, that membership is indicating that they believe this Minister called by God to serve in their pastorate.

What does it say about this call, if

(a) requests are made for former ministers /alternative ministers to conduct baptisms, marriages and funerals?

(b) former ministers remain the pastoral confidantes of church members who are unable or unwilling to relate easily to the present minister?

(c) retired ministers within the congregation, who are known to have different views to the present minister become –albeit unwillingly- thrust into leadership of an informal “breakaway group” within the congregation?

## (2) BOUNDARIES

Ministers expect to become involved with people at the very deepest levels of their being and to serve them at their most significant rites of passage. Currently all Ministers are required to undergo (very valuable) training in maintaining Boundaries. However,

(1) Is it reasonable to expect Ministers to avoid making close friends amongst the members of their congregation?

(2) And is it possible, when a Minister moves to another pastorate or retires, for friendships to be maintained beyond the minister/member relationship and without putting relationships with a new Minister at risk?

## CHALLENGES TO MINISTERS AND CONGREGATIONS

- How might Ministers enable their congregations to uphold the full implications of the Call that was given to them without coming across as petty or jealous of other Ministers?
- How might former Ministers/other Ministers enable congregations to understand the full implications of the Call to their Minister without hurting people’s feelings?
- How might Elders and Church members help those on the fringes of church life to understand that ministry at rites of passage in one’s life is not a “consumer choice” but a recognition of divinely ordained roles within the local church?
- How does the sense of Call relate to Team Ministry? What are the questions that need to be asked and the systems put in place to ensure that that each Minister in a team is equally recognized by the congregations in which they serve?
- How can we help our Ministers in adjusting to changing (as opposed to ending) relationships with former church members?
- How can we enable our church members to remain in warm and close friendships with former Ministers, whilst relinquishing their “ministry?”

## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Synod will divide into small groups in order to discuss some specific scenarios.

Each is taken from a real-life situation but some details have been altered to protect confidentiality.

Each group is asked to write the answers (clearly and legibly!) to the discussion questions on the large sheets of paper supplied. These will then be on display during the lunch break, so that we can look at what each group has said.

We also invite each group to propose one or two “guidelines” on the conduct of Ministers/congregations in regard to the issues before us. These will be compiled and displayed immediately after lunch.

## **SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION**

### **SCENARIOS**

1. James served a local church as Minister for 15 years. He forged many strong and warm relationships with members of the congregation. When he retired, he took care to move out of the area where he had served but does not feel that he should turn his back on the many close friends he made during his ministry. When Jane, a young woman he baptized as a baby, confirmed as a teenager and supported through the death of her father, phones to tell him that she is getting married and that it would mean a lot to her if he would conduct the ceremony in his former church, he says that he would be delighted, just so long as the present minister has no objections. So Jane tells Mark, the new minister of just six months that she would like James to conduct her wedding, please.

- **How do you think Mark will feel?**
- **How do you think Mark should respond?**
- **Do you think that James said/did the right thing? If not, what should he have said/done?**
- **How do you think Jane understands Mark’s call to be Minister of her church?**

2. Michael, who is not a regular churchgoer, is arranging his mother’s funeral. She has always been an active member of her church and enjoyed good relationships with all their ministers but her written request for her funeral is that Adrian, a former Minister of her church, should be asked to conduct the service. Michael promptly contacts Adrian and Adrian agrees. They fix a date with the undertaker and Michael phones Sheila, the present Minister, and tells her what has been arranged, so that she can let people know. Sheila is not happy with this *fait accompli* and neither are the Elders of the church. But when they say so, Michael is hurt and angry and cannot see why there should be a problem.

- **Do you think that Sheila’s attitude is unreasonable?**
- **Do you think that Adrian has “overstepped the boundaries” in any way? If so, in what way?**
- **What do you think Sheila should do now?**
- **What do you think the Elders/church members should do now?**

3. Juliet has retired from pastoral ministry, moved away from her previous church and become a member of Someplace URC. This church has recently become vacant under somewhat distressing circumstances- the previous Minister, a person of strong views, had caused division in the church, resigned very angrily and left a lot of emotional and spiritual confusion behind. The Interim Moderator is already over-stretched and able to do only the bare minimum required of her role, so Juliet finds it natural to offer pastoral care and spiritual nurture to the

church members. She is delighted when Ian, a theological student is called to be the next Minister and looks forward to supporting him in his new ministry.

But things do not go well. Ian is inexperienced and makes a lot of mistakes; the congregation are still in an anxious state following their previous ministry. Juliet realizes that more and more members of the congregation are coming to her to talk over their pastoral and spiritual difficulties.

It all comes to a head when the Harry, the Church Secretary is critically ill and his wife calls Juliet to come to the hospital, saying that Ian will only make the situation more stressful because Harry found him very difficult to work with.

- **Do you think that Juliet has “overstepped the boundaries” in any way? If so, in what way?**
- **How do you think Harry and his wife understand Ian’s Call to be minister of their church?**
- **What do you think Juliet should do now?**
- **Can you think of anything that might have been done by Ministers, Elders or congregation to prevent things getting to this stage?**

4. Maureen has been Minister of St Jude’s URC for two years and is happy there.

But she is becoming uneasy about the role of her predecessor in the church life.

Danny (the previous Minister) has retired and moved out of the area. He has also made it abundantly clear that he will not return to conduct baptisms, weddings and funerals. But when she goes to visit people in pastoral crisis, it turns out that Danny has been phoning them and writing to them. And when decisions likely to have something of an impact on church life have to be made at Church Meetings, she learns that some church members have been on the phone to Danny, asking what he thinks about it. There have been several anniversary parties for families within the church to which she has not been invited but Danny has. There have also been weddings and funerals at which Danny has been present and, whilst he has been invited to join the family at receptions, she has not.

Maureen cannot help but feel hurt and wonders if she is over-reacting.

- **Do you think Maureen is over-reacting?**
- **How does Maureen understand her Call to be Minister of this church?**
- **What do you think she should do about her unhappiness?**
- **Is there anything Danny might do? Do you feel that he is “overstepping the boundaries” in any way?**

5. Gerald and Kevin are in a Team Ministry, with joint pastoral charge of five small congregations. They work well together, each having different strengths to support one another. One day Kevin takes a phone call from a church family wanting to arrange baptism for their baby. They mention the most convenient date for them and Kevin says that he is leading worship in their church on that Sunday, so he will be delighted to baptize their baby.

*Oh. Well, actually we were hoping that Gerald could do it. He conducted our wedding and it we thought it would be nice for him to do this too. Would you mind?*

- **What do you think Kevin should say?**
- **Can you see problems arising in the future if Kevin agrees to the request?**
- **Can you see problems arising in the future if Kevin refuses?**
- **Where can you see specific “issues” regarding Call and Boundaries in pastorates served by Team Ministry?**