

STATEMENT OF CONCERN

CELEBRATING THE CLERGY/CONGREGATIONAL RELATIONSHIP

The relationship that God intends to exist between clergy and congregation is to be celebrated. Paul, in his letter to Timothy, called the work of the clergy within the congregation a noble task (I Timothy 3:1). In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul told the congregation that he thanked God every time he thought of them (Philippians 1:3). In the book of Acts, we are told that the elders of the church at Ephesus loved Paul so deeply that when he left, the elders prayed with him, embraced him, kissed him, and wept because they would not see him again (Acts 20:36-38).

Clergy and congregation share life in a dimension matched by few human relationships. They support, encourage, challenge, and inspire one another. They minister with and to one another, accompanying one another through both the most jubilant and the most sorrowful experiences of life. The opportunity to pastor a church and the privilege of a church to receive pastoral care are profound reciprocal blessings. Biblical instruction for clergy/congregational relationships can be found in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-14.

As in all meaningful relationships, there are ways in which the clergy/congregation relationship can be damaged. Sometimes clergy commit transgressions against the congregations they serve. Tragically, clergy sometimes abuse the sacred relationships they have with individuals in a congregation or with a congregation as a whole. In other situations, the congregation or individuals within it exploit their role in the church to the severe detriment of the pastor. Many times the relationship between congregation and clergy is damaged simply because the expectations of one were not met by the other. In such instances, no grievous sin or lapse in ethics has been committed. Still, disappointment can lead to estrangement and sometimes to the severing of the relationship. Both clergy and laity need to learn to say "I appologize" and to seek forgiveness and restoration with the spirit of Christ as instructed in Ephesians 4:25-32.

In most cases, when the relationship between clergy and congregation is damaged, both parties bear some of the blame. With Paul we need to acknowledge we are not yet perfect (Philippians 3:12). Regardless of who is at fault, when the relationship between clergy and congregation is significantly harmed, great pain is inflicted upon all involved, especially, the witness of the body of Christ to the world. This pain can express itself through severe division within the congregation, loss of membership, systemic pain, or involuntary termination of the pastor. In some cases the anguish becomes so great that members turn away from participation in any church and pastors pursue a change in career.

The Ministers Council of American Baptist Churches U.S.A. and other clergy groups have found that clergy/congregation relationships can be greatly enhanced by the formation of a stated covenant between the clergy and the congregation, examples of which can be obtained from the Ministers Council. This written covenant is to be developed and agreed on by both the clergy and the congregation. The covenant is more

than a job description. It outlines the congregation's expectations of and commitment to the clergy as well as the clergy's expectations of and commitment to the congregation.

The congregation should include in the covenant a clear explanation of compensation and benefits, expectations of work hours and time off for family and self, a commitment to provide continuing education opportunities for the clergy, and a description of the responsibilities the clergy is expected to fulfill. In addition, the covenant should describe how the clergy is to be evaluated and what process shall be followed if the clergy is to be commended or if disappointment or grievances arise with the clergy's fulfillment of responsibilities. A clear statement of the help and resources that would be employed in the event of conflict is essential. Furthermore, the covenant should commit the congregation to a stated code of ethics in dealing with the pastor. The ethical code should include a commitment to honesty, compassion, clarity, open dialogue, gender sensitivity, confidentiality, forgiveness, support, affirmation, spiritual growth, justice, sexual morality, and civility.

The clergy should include in the covenant an acceptance of the compensation, benefits, work expectations, time off, continuing education provisions, and responsibilities as agreed upon. In addition, the clergy should state a commitment to follow the process established for addressing disappointments and grievances with the congregation, including the willingness to work with the help and resources requested by the congregation. Lastly, the clergy should commit to follow a stated code of ethics in ministering to the congregation. The ethical code should include a commitment to honesty, compassion, clarity, open dialogue, gender sensitivity, confidentiality, forgiveness, support, affirmation, spiritual growth, justice, sexual morality, and civility.

Because of both the wondrous potential for blessing and the tragic potential for pain that exists in clergy/congregation relationships, it is of utmost importance for all involved to dedicate themselves to building healthy relationships.

We therefore call upon:

- American Baptist congregations and clergy to find ways of celebrating and nurturing their ministry together.
- American Baptist congregations and clergy to seek the help of the Ministers Council of the ABCUSA and other resources in developing a covenant of their commitments to one another.
- American Baptist congregations to provide clergy with compensation, benefits, continuing education, and other kinds of support in keeping with their ministry assignments and with the standards recommended by their Region.
- American Baptist clergy to follow the highest ethical codes of their calling and profession.
- American Baptist congregations and clergy to make use of the resources of their Region in responding to disappointments and grievances within their relationship.

- American Baptist congregations to seek every avenue of conflict resolution before involuntary termination of clergy occurs. And if it occurs, to administer termination with grace and compassionate compensation.
- American Baptist congregations and clergy throughout their mutual ministry to relate to each other with the full character of Christian love as set forth by our Lord Jesus Christ.

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VOTE: YES: 481; NO: 5