

Appendix E. When Divorce Comes to a Clergy Family

Approved June 10, 2008

I. God's Plan for Marriage

The United Methodist Social Principles expresses our understanding of God's plan for marriage and the sad reality that some marriages will end in divorce.

*God's plan is for lifelong, faithful marriage. The church must be on the forefront of premarital and post marital counseling in order to create and preserve strong marriages. However, when a married couple is estranged beyond reconciliation, even after thoughtful consideration and counsel, divorce is a regrettable alternative in the midst of brokenness. We grieve over the devastating emotional, spiritual, and economic consequences of divorce for all involved and are concerned about high divorce rates. (**The Book of Discipline**, 2004, ¶ 161 G.)*

II. Purpose of Policy

The purpose of this policy is to outline a procedure for clergy facing divorce because their marital relationship has become estranged beyond reconciliation.

A. Prevention and Intervention: We encourage families to seek pastoral counseling as a first resort, not as a last resort. Individual, couple or family counseling is available through the conference health benefits package provided to every full-time clergy, and on a limited basis from the Conference Pastoral Counselor. While we encourage and expect the parties involved to exhaust all efforts to restore the relationships through marital and/or family counseling, this policy does not outline any requirements for preventive counseling. (See *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church*, 2004, R22. "Support for Clergy Families," which addresses the pressures and concerns for the pastoral family.)

B. When a Divorce Process Begins: Our goals are informed by *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church*, 2004, R23, "Caring for Clergy Spouses, Children, and Youth During Divorce":

- To support all members of the family while they are going through the stress and pain that accompany a divorce.
- To maintain the integrity of the pastoral office held in sacred trust within the congregation and the covenant community of all clergy.
- To assess and facilitate (where possible) the clergy person's fitness for ministry.

III. Procedure

A. The Church shall be as proactive as possible in maintaining the integrity of the role of the clergy person and of the pastoral family. The District Superintendent is charged with maintaining the integrity of the Church when conversations or accusations from individuals or church leadership indicate there are known or highly suspected marital problems, including but not limited to infidelity. The District Superintendent has a responsibility to confer, suggest, and even pursue appropriate action with the pastoral family instead of waiting until legal civil action has been started.

One way District Superintendents fulfill this proactive assignment is by monitoring each clergy person's compliance with the requirement to attend at least one conference-approved Sexual Ethics Seminar every three years.

B. Once the clergy person or the clergy's spouse informs the District Superintendent of an impending separation or divorce the following steps should be taken:

1. The District Superintendent notifies the Bishop and the Cabinet.
2. The District Superintendent meets with clergy and spouse as soon as possible. If there appears to be no possibility of reconciliation, the District Superintendent chooses a co-District Superintendent and together they meet with the clergy and spouse for guidance and exploration of the procedures to follow. [While we desire the cooperation of the non-clergy spouse so we can know more fully the issues involved in the divorce and can offer appropriate care, we are clear in understanding that we cannot require anything of the non-clergy spouse.]
3. Once divorce petition(s) have been filed, the clergy person is required to provide legal copies of the divorce petitions within 10 calendar days. We request the spouse to do the same. This will also inform the District Superintendent of the initial concerns between both parties leading to the divorce.

The following church process will be followed regardless of the timing of a civil process:

If the petition reveals:

- a. Abuse, neglect, adultery or any chargeable offense, ¶2702 and ¶362 will be followed.
 - b. "Irreconcilable differences" or "mutually agreed upon reasons for divorce":
 - i. Prior to filing for divorce – Unless counseling is currently ongoing by a conference-approved counselor, counseling sessions will be required for the clergy and recommended for the spouse, with the possibility of an involuntary leave of absence if the clergy refuses or neglects counseling. The purpose of counseling is to ensure *both* parties have sought to redeem and repair the relationship and/or the integrity of *both* individuals and other family and church members before civil action is taken, if possible. Counseling is necessary as the clergy person works toward wholeness and healing so as to continue the effective work of ministry with the people of God.
 - ii. After filing for divorce – If both parties are amicable and willing to participate in counseling at the time of the filing of the civil petition and notification of the District Superintendent, a minimum of six (6) sessions by an approved conference counselor is recommended to the couple, required for the clergy person, with additional sessions allowed as determined by the same approved conference counselor.
 - The purpose of such counseling will be to aid both parties in dissolving the marriage and adjusting to the changes that a divorce will bring to the couple, family members and to the church body.
 - If the non-clergy spouse is unwilling to participate in this counseling, the clergy will still be required to engage in a minimum of six sessions by an approved conference counselor.
 - When the required number of sessions are completed, the clergy will make an appointment with the Conference Pastoral Counselor who will assess the clergy person's readiness to continue in ministry. The Conference Pastoral Counselor will make a recommendation to the Appointive Cabinet.
 - Clergy are required to sign appropriate releases of information with all counselors to permit their communication with the Conference Pastoral Counselor. This sharing is necessary to understand the scope of issues addressed and the readiness of a clergy person to continue in ministry with integrity and effectiveness. Appropriate professional confidences will be maintained.
4. As soon as practical after notification of an impending divorce, the District Superintendent will schedule a meeting with the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee Chairperson and the clergy person. This meeting is to discuss the impending separation/divorce and to develop a strategy for informing the PPR Committee and the congregation at-large.
 - a. If a grievance is filed, then ¶360 takes full effect.
 - b. If no grievance is filed, then the PPR Committee and the congregation are informed and prepared for all partners to deal with grief, anger, hurt and other emerging feelings.
 5. When the divorce decree is completed and filed, the clergy person is to provide legal copies of the decree within 10 calendar days to the District Superintendent. The District Superintendent shall compare the decree to the previously filed petition(s) to confirm that no further corrective action or church judicial/administrative process is required in determining the clergy person's fitness to carry duties associated with the clergy's sacred office. A copy of the divorce decree is to be placed in the clergy person's personnel file.
 6. The District Superintendent, clergy person, PPR Chair and, when possible, the Bishop will meet and consider options open to both the local church and the pastor. The options are listed in ¶ 362.4.a :
 - i. Retaining current appointment
 - ii. An appointment to another parish
 - iii. Leave of Absence (voluntary or involuntary)
 - iv. Sabbatical Leave
 - v. Honorable Location

- vi. Retirement
- vii. Withdrawal
- viii. Voluntary Termination
- ix. Transfer to another conference
- x. Continued Counseling
- xi. Administrative Complaint
- xii. Judicial Complaint

If the clergy person is unwilling to engage in the outlined policy or if the Appointive Cabinet feels a change of status needs to be recommended, a complaint may be filed with the Board of Ordained Ministry and may result in one of the preceding options.

- 7. To facilitate the wholeness and healing of the clergy and spouse after the divorce decree is final, both parties are requested to meet with a Conference-approved counselor once a quarter for the first year. The clergy person is required to participate in this pastoral after-care for the first year. The clergy person is required to have the Conference-approved counselor submit a report noting compliance with this requirement to the Conference Pastoral Counselor. Appropriate release of information agreements shall be signed to permit this consultation.
- 8. When the process is followed to completion and the clergy is in good standing, a statement to such effect will be entered into their permanent file of record. The Conference Pastoral Counselor will report compliance to the clergy person's District Superintendent.
- 9. When a clergy person's marriage dissolves in divorce, and when that divorce is the second or more in the clergy person's lifetime, the District Superintendent will bring this to the attention of the Appointive Cabinet for evaluation. The clergy person will be required to participate in psychological testing and evaluation with the Conference-approved testing agency paid for by the Board of Ordained Ministry. Appropriate releases will be signed to permit the testing results to be sent to the Conference Pastoral Counselor for assessment and for making a recommendation to the Appointive Cabinet as they determine the clergy person's fitness for continued service as a clergy. While this may appear to be stringent and/or judgmental, we believe these procedures are necessary for the healing of broken persons and the integrity of the sacred ministerial office.

IV. After Care of Divorced Clergy and Their Families

The District Superintendent will continue to offer pastoral and practical care for the clergy person and their family. The form of practical assistance needed will vary depending on the specific circumstances. The practical assistance offered will be determined by the resources available.