

ADVISORY OPINION # 20
HONORABLY RETIRED MINISTERS

“...and the multitude of years should teach wisdom.” (Job 32:7b)

I. Retired Ministers are a valuable resource to the presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Retired Ministers are encouraged to remain active:

- A. “Honorably retired ministers are encouraged to transfer their membership to the presbytery in which they live and the presbytery is encouraged to receive them.”¹
- B. “Presbyteries should encourage honorably retired ministers to use their experience and skills in creative and meaningful ways. Those who are able and willing to reengage in ministry and service to others should relate to a particular church or presbytery.”²

Many retired ministers serve as parish associate³, pulpit supply, even temporary pastor.⁴ Many are honored as pastor emeritus.⁵ (note restrictions in II.A. below)

- C. But “[f]or those who do not or cannot [actively participate in ministry], the presbytery should provide nurture and support.”⁶

Honorably retired ministers are not required to engage in any ministerial activities, especially if they are not physically or mentally able to do so.

II. Retired ministers may not continue or return to serve in the same congregation from which they retired.

- A. The Standards of Ethical Conduct approved by the General Assembly in 1998 provide that retired ministers will:

“14. Deal honorably with the record of my predecessor and upon leaving a ministry or office speak and act in ways that support the ministry of my successor;

“15. Participate in the life of a ministry setting I left or from which I have retired only as directed by presbytery;

¹ G-11.0412b

² Ibid.

³ G-14.0515

⁴ G-14.0513

⁵ G-14.0605

⁶ G-11.0412b

“16. Provide pastoral services for a congregation I previously served only as directed by the presbytery and provide pastoral services to members of other congregations only with the consent of their pastors;”⁷

Many presbyteries have adopted these standards and the provisions above are thus binding upon honorably retired minister members.

B. The Board of Pensions Post Retirement Service Regulations likewise prohibit any compensated service after retirement from the pre-retirement “employer.”

1. A minister receiving a pension under the Benefits Plan may not serve the same church or employing organization he or she served at the time of retirement.
2. With the approval of his or her presbytery of jurisdiction, a member may continue to receive retirement benefits and
 - be employed by another church or employing organization in any temporary pastoral or other interim position. These positions include stated supply, interim pastor, interim co-pastor, interim associate pastor, temporary supply, or organizing pastor; or
 - be employed by a church or an organization not under the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); or
 - be employed in a position that is not eligible for participation in the Benefits Plan.⁸

III. Retired ministers are not required to undertake ministry, but if they choose to do so, that ministry must be validated by the presbytery of membership.

A. Retired ministers remain active ministers in the presbytery of membership, retaining all rights of membership.⁹ This is our historic understanding:

The PCUSA General Assembly in 1948 noted: “...the retirement of a minister does not affect in any way [the minister’s] status as a minister or deprive [the minister] of any of the functions of [the] office. [The minister] has still the right to preach, to administer the sacraments, to represent the presbytery as a Commissioner in the higher judicatories of the Church, and to exercise other functions of the ministry, to the same extent as in [the minister’s] active ministry.”¹⁰

⁷ Standards of Ethical Conduct for Ordained Officers, II (pp. 14,15,16)

⁸ Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) “Post Retirement Service”

⁹ G-11.0406a, G-11.0412a

¹⁰ PCUSA, 1948, pp. 119-120, Status of Retired Ministers

B. But honorably retired ministers remain under the jurisdiction and direction of the presbytery of membership. This, too, reflects our historic understanding:

“[The minister] is still responsible to the presbytery under whose jurisdiction he [or she] happens to be.”¹¹

C. Such jurisdiction includes the responsibility to consider validation of particular ministries. This is a foundational power/responsibility of a presbytery. In 1996 the General Assembly Judicial Commission noted:

“...In light of G-6.0201, G-11.0103k, G-11.0103n, G-11.0103p, G-11.0502b, a presbytery clearly has the right and responsibility to approve or disapprove of the ministerial tasks undertaken by its members,”¹²

D. In a recent case the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission opined on the reciprocal responsibility imposed upon minister members when it held:

“Moreover, G-6.0108 recognizes the right of the corporate community to place limits upon the exercise of freedom of conscience by its officers. The Constitution is that self-limitation which the people themselves place upon their own rights in order that they may be able to live and work together in love and unity.”¹³

The Stated Clerk is not aware of any constitutional provision nor any authoritative interpretation¹⁴ that would excuse retired ministers from seeking validation of their ministerial tasks.¹⁵

E. Retired ministers are not required by the *Constitution* to engage in any validated ministry, although as we have seen they are encouraged to do so in a setting other than one served prior to retirement, but all post-retirement ministry must be carried out with the permission and under the accountability of the presbytery of membership.

A presbytery’s Committee on Ministry may want to consider adding a paragraph to its Validated Ministry policy (as required at G-11.0403¹⁶) that refers

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² Rice v. Presbytery of Philadelphia. 1996, 170, 12.068

¹³ Parker T. Williamson v. Presbytery of Western North Carolina, 2006, 217-7, p. 475

¹⁴ Issued under G-13.0103r

¹⁵ For a discussion of the validation process, see Advisory Opinion #16.

¹⁶ G-11.0403 Criteria for Ministry of Continuing Members

A presbytery shall determine the ministers of the Word and Sacrament who shall be its continuing members. In making this determination the presbytery shall be guided by written criteria developed by the presbytery for validation of ministries within its bounds. These criteria shall be based upon the description of the nature of ordained office found in G-6.0100 and G-6.0200 and the following standards:

specifically to the validation of ministry of honorably retired pastors. Each presbytery will determine for itself just where the line is for such ministry: for example, between volunteering for a week working on a Habitat house and being the paid Director of habitat for Humanity in the community, or between serving Meals on Wheels each week and serving as the volunteer manager of the local Meals on Wheels program.

G-11.0403a. The ministry of continuing members shall be in demonstrable conformity with the mission of God's people in the world as set forth in Holy Scripture, The Book of Confessions, and the Book of Order of this church.

G-11.0403b. The ministry shall be one that serves others, aids others, and enables the ministries of others.

G-11.0403c. The ministry shall give evidence of theologically informed fidelity to God's Word. This will normally require the Master of Divinity degree or its equivalent and the completion of the requirements for ordination set forth in G-14.0402.

G-11.0403d. The ministry shall be carried on in accountability for its character and conduct to the presbytery and to organizations, agencies, and institutions.

G-11.0403e. The ministry shall include responsible participation in the deliberations and work of the presbytery and in the worship and service of a congregation.