

Florida Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church

Policy on Clergy Divorce Revised September 2017

Preamble

District Superintendents are pastors who care deeply for all clergy, especially the clergy of their district. However, in a matter requiring supervision, such as the potential divorce of a clergy person, the superintendent is supervisor, not pastor, to the clergy person. Part of the role of the superintendent as supervisor, is to ask hard questions about the circumstances leading to a divorce and to ascertain whether there has been any immoral or inappropriate behavior (chargeable offenses, ¶2702 The Book of Discipline 2016, on the part of the clergy person which contributed to the divorce. This discovery process and the questions asked are sometimes difficult for the clergy person. However, this investigation is a necessary part of supervision. Clergy considering divorce are encouraged to find a trusted pastor colleague to be pastor to the clergy person during the divorce and in the recovery from divorce. A colleague pastor can be a confidential friend and confessor, and truly a pastor to the clergy person in a divorce. A District Superintendent, as much as he or she cares, cannot be the clergy person's pastor.

Clergy are often in the position of referring persons to counseling and other kinds of assistance. Clergy need to be willing to seek and receive help when they are experiencing difficulties in their own lives. Clergy experiencing divorce will be asked to work with two District Superintendents in developing a “Covenant for Healing” for the clergy person (and family). Superintendents will give serious consideration to the clergy person’s willingness to pursue healing and help, and the clergy person’s ability to take personal responsibility for his/her part in the failure of a marriage, in the discussion of the appropriateness of continuing in the present appointment, and/or the discussion of the clergy person’s availability to receive an appointment to a local church in the Florida Annual Conference. Unwillingness to take personal responsibility for the clergy person’s part in the divorce, and resistance to seeking and receiving help may make it necessary for the clergy person to take a leave from active ministry.

The clergy person must notify his/her District Superintendent when the clergy person and/or spouse are considering divorce. It shall be the clergy person’s responsibility to notify his/her District Superintendent before the engagement of an attorney or the filing for a divorce with a court of law. It is far better for the clergy person, if the clergy person notifies the Superintendent, than if another party, from the family or the church were to call the District Superintendent. The District Superintendent can assist the clergy person in managing information for the church regarding the potential divorce, if the superintendent has been notified. When the superintendent has no idea that a divorce is pending, and a church leader calls to complain about the effect of the clergy divorce upon the church, this makes a more difficult situation for the clergy person, and a more difficult matter for the superintendent to attempt to assist. Failure to notify the District Superintendent in a timely way may reflect on the consideration of the clergy person for appointment to a local church.

District Superintendents must also give supervision to churches and ministries. Most clergy who have experienced divorce admit that a minister/ pastor is not at his or her best, when going through a divorce process. On the other side of divorce, after healing and the hard work of counseling, the clergy person who has experienced divorce may be very helpful to couples who are struggling in their relationships. God can use painful experiences in the lives of pastors and ministers for healing and for good at some future point in time. The District Superintendent will work with the SPRC and other church leadership, when appropriate, to ascertain how best to help the congregation or ministry setting to deal with the divorce of the clergy person and to ascertain whether continuing service in that congregation (when the clergy person is serving a local church) is helpful or hurtful. The clergy person who is divorcing will be asked to cooperate with the District Superintendent's efforts to assist the local church or ministry setting in healing. Though the clergy person is "pastor" or "minister," it is necessary for the clergy person to understand that he/she may not have sufficient objectivity concerning his/her divorce to know what is best for a congregation's healing and future ministry.

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1. All clergy are encouraged to engage in counseling, as a couple, individually, or both, when a clergy marriage is in difficulty. Clergy may also arrange counseling through a pastoral counseling center, many of which will work with clergy families on a sliding fee scale. The resources of Shade and Fresh Water <http://www.flumc.org/shadeandfreshwater>, vacation, Spiritual Growth Leave (The Book of Discipline, 2016 ¶350, and financial counseling through Ernst and Young (GBOPHB) or a non-profit consumer credit counseling (www.ccsstl.org) may assist clergy families in the crises they face.
2. The clergy person shall notify his/her District Superintendent when the clergy person and/or spouse are considering divorce. It shall be the clergy person's responsibility to notify his/her District Superintendent before the engagement of an attorney or the filing for a divorce with a court of law. Failure to notify the District Superintendent in a timely way may reflect on the consideration of the clergy person for appointment to a local church.
3. The District Superintendent will arrange a meeting with the clergy person, the spouse (if willing to participate) and another District Superintendent of the clergy person's choosing. The clergy person will furnish contact information for the spouse to the District Superintendent. At this meeting the clergy person, spouse (if willing to participate) and superintendents shall discuss:
 - a. The circumstances leading to divorce, from the perspective of the clergy person and the spouse (if the spouse is willing to participate)
 - b. The District Superintendents shall ask the clergy person and the spouse (if the spouse is willing to participate) if there has been any immoral behavior or inappropriate sexual behavior on the part of the clergy person which is leading to the decision to divorce
 - c. The District Superintendents shall discuss options for care and healing for the clergy person, spouse, and family. The District Superintendents shall discuss elements of a written covenant for healing to be developed in cooperation with the clergy person
 - d. The District Superintendents shall refer the spouse and clergy person to the conference benefits officer to discuss benefits available after divorce
 - e. The District Superintendents shall discuss issues for clergy to address post-divorce with Conference Benefits Officer (designated next of kin for life insurance, pension, etc.)
 - f. Clergy responsibility for spouse and children following the divorce
4. The clergy person shall submit a first draft of a covenant for the clergy person's /family healing to the two district superintendents no later than 21 days after the meeting. The District Superintendents shall work collaboratively with the clergy

person to finalize the covenant. The covenant shall include a program of healing.

5. Clergy shall refrain from dating or entering a love relationship until after the divorce is final. The District Superintendents may determine an additional time frame for the clergy person to refrain from dating or entering a love relationship (beyond finalization of the divorce). The clergy person shall inform his or her District Superintendent when, after the prescribed time frame, the clergy person begins dating. Clergy are advised not to date a parishioner. If the clergy person chooses to date a parishioner, a process of accountability and care shall be designed by the District Superintendent and clergy person. The concern is that a failed dating relationship may leave a parishioner emotionally wounded and without a church home. Plans should be made for the parishioner to have his or her own pastor who is NOT the person they are dating.
6. A second or subsequent divorce of a clergy person may necessitate additional healing work and may impact the clergy person's eligibility for an appointment. A leave of absence may be appropriate in the event of a second or subsequent divorce.
7. The District Superintendent will meet with the Staff-Parish Relations Committee of the Local Church (when the clergy person is serving in a local church) to discuss the clergy divorce and healing options for the local church. The District Superintendent will be willing to meet with a local extension ministry personnel committee or appropriate group identified by a board of directors, if invited.
8. Florida Conference clergy serving in other annual conferences or serving extension ministries beyond the bounds of the Florida Annual Conference shall contact the Florida Conference District Superintendent of the district where their charge conference membership is held, by telephone, to determine how best to accomplish supervision through a divorce.
9. Options for Healing for the clergy person and family:
 - a. "Shade and Fresh Water" <http://www.flumc.org/shadeandfreshwater> offers separate Divorce Recovery Retreats for Clergy, and Divorce Recovery Retreats for Spouses. These retreats include a monthly phone conference for 12-18 months after divorce
 - b. Shade and Fresh Water offers (Extreme Shade) for clergy teen children after divorce
 - c. Shade and Fresh Water offers individual retreats with a Spiritual Director for clergy
 - d. Spiritual Growth Leave (The Book of Discipline, 2016, ¶350)
 - e. Financial counseling through Ernst and Young (Westpath)
 - f. Financial/credit counseling through a non-profit consumer credit counseling service
 - g. The Life Enrichment Center in Leesburg is available at a reduced fee for individual retreats/family time for clergy
 - h. Voluntary leave of absence (The Book of Discipline, 2016, ¶353)

10. Options for healing for the Local Church

- a. A pastoral counselor to work with SPRC and other key leaders to design a process of communication and conversation towards healing for the local church in the experience of the divorce of a pastor/deacon
 - b. A service of healing, led by other clergy of the district, planned with the clergy person and key leaders
 - c. Ongoing consultation for the SPRC by the District Superintendent for monitoring the church's response, helpfulness, healing and to assess the clergy person's healing and effectiveness in ministry
11. The clergy person shall meet a second time (either in person or by conference call) with the two District Superintendents, six to eight months after the initial meeting and/or before the next appointment making session of the cabinet to discuss progress in healing and impact on the local church of the clergy divorce.
12. The District Superintendent shall write a report of this process to be placed in the clergy person's supervisory file, including a copy of the covenant for healing and updates on completion of the program of healing.

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Options for Healing for Clergy and Clergy Family

1. There are pastoral counseling centers throughout the Florida Annual Conference, which may or may not be eligible to utilize the clergy family's health insurance, and which work regularly with clergy and clergy families on a sliding fee scale.
2. Shade and Fresh Water (www.shadeandfreshwater.org) is a healing ministry of the Florida Annual Conference that offers Divorce Recovery Retreats for clergy spouses following divorce, Divorce Recovery Retreats for clergy following divorce, group retreats for teen children of clergy experiencing divorce (Extreme Shade), and offers Spiritual Directors.
3. A covenanted relationship with a clergy person or a small group of clergy who will walk with the clergy person through the divorce process, or a clergy person and/or group of clergy spouses for the divorcing clergy spouse may be helpful for accountability for healing, and for prayer and support. The conversations are to be confidential. The participants are to report to the District Superintendent a summary of the healing, health and participation of the divorcing clergy person.
4. Vacation and time away may be very helpful during or following a divorce process. The Life Enrichment Center in Leesburg, offers a reduced rate for clergy and clergy families, which may be an affordable way to spend time away.
5. A clergy person may want to consider a Spiritual Growth Leave (The Book of Discipline, 2016, ¶350)
6. Financial stress is present in a majority of divorces. Assistance is available. Financial counseling through Ernst and Young is available through the Westpath. Contact www.westpath.org for specific information on financial counseling. Clergy may also contact Westpath to access their UMPIP (United Methodist Personal Investment Plan) for a hardship loan, educational needs, or the down payment on a house. Consumer credit counseling through a non-profit agency may assist with a plan for managing consumer debt (www.cccsstl.org).
7. A clergy person may decide to take a Voluntary Leave of Absence (The Book of Discipline, 2016, ¶353). This time away could provide needed space for healing before entering a new local church as pastor.

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SAMPLE

Covenant for Healing for *Name*: _____

I commit to counseling with *name of provider* _____, for a minimum of # sessions to work on issues I identify in relation to my divorce. I am willing to discuss my learnings, in part, with my District Superintendent and another District Superintendent selected by me.

I commit to meeting with a prayer partner, *Name* _____, or a group of clergy (Names) _____, for a covenanted time of accountability, support, conversation and prayer for my healing.

I commit to a time of daily prayer and devotional reflection.

I commit to a day off, on *Name of Day* _____, for renewal.

I commit to work with a financial counselor (provider) _____ on a personal/family budget, and a process for debt reduction.

I commit to attending the next Shade and Fresh Water Divorce Recovery Retreat and will contact Shade and Fresh Water no later than _____ (date).

<http://www.flumc.org/shadeandfreshwater>

I commit to talking with my child and my child's other parent about the child's participation in Extreme Shade provided by <http://www.flumc.org/shadeandfreshwater>.

I commit to refrain from dating at least until my divorce has been final for one year (date of divorce) _____.

I commit to share my learnings, and to be transparent with my District Superintendent and another District Superintendent of my choosing about my participation in the above.

Pastor Signature: _____

District Superintendent Signature: _____

District Superintendent Signature: _____

Date (month/day/year): _____

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Implementation Plan

1. District Superintendents shall distribute copies of this revised policy at a clergy meeting in the current Conference year. Introduction of the policy shall be an agenda item at a clergy meeting.
2. Clergy newly appointed in the Florida Conference shall sign off on the policy at the Right Start new minister orientation. Other clergy shall sign off on the revised policy one time (in the 2017-2018 Conference year). The original signed acknowledgment will be sent to the center for clergy excellence. The Office of Clergy Excellence will scan and send a digital copy back to District Office. A copy shall be placed in the clergy personnel file.
3. The Divorce Policy shall be posted on the conference web site.

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Name of Clergy person (please print):

I have read and received a copy of the Florida Annual Conference Policy on Clergy Divorce,
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Signature: _____

Date (month/day/year): _____