

## GUIDELINES FOR HANDLING MARITAL DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED BY CLERGY

Below is our ordinary procedure. We recognize that the procedure finally used in individual cases may vary.

1. The **General Presbyter** is often among the first to learn when marital difficulties emerge. It is appropriate for the **General Presbyter** to initiate conversation with the minister in order to understand in a general sort of way what is happening, or to request a member of the **Pastoral Care Subcommittee** of the **Committee on Ministry** to initiate such a conversation.
2. The minister involved and his/her spouse should be strongly encouraged to avail themselves of counseling services. The **COM Discretionary Fund** can assist in the cost of marital counseling. The procedure for this should be worked out with the **General Presbyter**.
3. If it becomes apparent that the minister involved is moving toward a separation or divorce, then the **General Presbyter** should inform the minister that he/she needs to help the **Committee on Ministry** learn about the situation. It is suggested that the minister choose one to three members of the **Committee on Ministry** to provide counsel.
4. The above named COM members need to be informed of the general circumstances surrounding the impending separation or divorce with particular concern for the impact on the family members. When a minister lives in a manse, this issue needs to be discussed as well. If it appears that the minister is acting with integrity and has thought through the possible ramifications of the decision, then it is appropriate to consider the next steps.
5. The above named COM members report to the Pastoral Care subcommittee the general information that was shared in their meeting with the minister involved. The **Committee on Ministry** enters into its minutes the fact that they have been consulted and have provided counsel.
6. Whenever possible, a member of COM or the GP should always be present at the time when the session is informed of the pending separation or divorce, and in worship as well, when the congregation is informed. The meeting of the Session should be a called, not stated, meeting of Session, so that other items of business do not distract from the important conversation and planning around this issue. A critical question at this point is to determine the degree of support that the session feels toward its pastor. If the support is strong, the session and the minister work out a plan for informing the congregation.
7. If it is determined that the support is questionable, the whole matter is treated by the committee as a situation where there is potential conflict. The committee must then plan a way to intervene and be helpful.
8. It is helpful when the General Presbyter, the pastor, and the clerk of session meet before any Session meeting or announcement to the congregation, to prepare a draft of a letter to the congregation. This letter should go out the day after the Session meeting, or at least early enough that the entire congregation receives it before the next Sunday. The Pastor (and spouse if possible) should also prepare a letter, to tell the congregation what will be helpful to the couple, i.e. who will remain in the manse, who's moving, where children will be, custodial responsibilities, what sorts of notes, letters, or phone calls would be appreciated, and where privacy is important, etc. The more specific the pastor and spouse can be in the letter, the more helpful it is to the congregation.
9. A member of the **Committee on Ministry** is appointed to offer to work with the spouse of the minister. The purpose of this is to help the spouse know that he or she has a channel through which to receive resources and support during the period of marital difficulties.