

**North Georgia Annual Conference
The United Methodist Church
Clergy Divorce Policy**

Read through the policy below, then log in through Data Services at <https://data.ngumc.org> to sign and save. To access the online form, scroll down the Main Index to the clergy section. Under "Create a new Clergy Worksheet or Report" select the appropriate report from the dropdown menu. At the end of the online form, you will be asked to e-sign and save your form.



Preamble:

The nurturing community exists with the potential to restore healing amid challenge and/or crisis. The church must be on the forefront supporting marriage in faithful and mature ways. Premarital, marital, and post-marital counseling are invaluable resources for sustaining healthy marital relations. Even with such support, there are situations in which couples find themselves estranged without reconciliation. Divorce is typically a painful alternative amid emotional, spiritual, relational, and economic brokenness (Book of Discipline 2016, para 161).

District superintendents care for pastors deeply, however their role during a potential or actual clergy divorce must be supervisory and not pastoral. The DS must ask the difficult questions regarding circumstances leading up to considerations for divorce. The DS must ascertain whether any inappropriate or immoral behavior has occurred on the part of the clergyperson involved that would result in a chargeable offense (Book of Discipline 2016, para 2702). Therefore, a supervisory response must occur. One key component of the supervisory response is ascertaining whether the clergyperson has maintained fidelity in marriage. The DS encourages the clergyperson and the spouse to maintain trusted pastoral relations during the process of divorce and divorce recovery.

It is the clergyperson’s responsibility to notify the DS if a divorce is being considered. The DS is notified prior to the engagement of an attorney or the filing of a divorce through a court of law. The superintendent is also responsible for managing information for the Staff Parish Relations Committee and the congregation regarding potential divorce. Situations become more difficult when family members or congregants notify the DS prior to notification by the clergyperson involved. Congregations may also feel that congregational life is threatened secondary to the divorce. Failure of the clergyperson to notify the superintendent in a timely manner is inappropriate and irresponsible.

The District Superintendent supervises the church and its leadership during a pending clergy divorce, to assess and determine best practices for maintaining worship, missions, and other ministries. The DS discerns whether the clergyperson has sufficient objectivity to lead the congregation during the season of divorce. The congregation is likely to feel broken and in need of healing. The current and future health of the congregation should be ascertained, managed, and protected.

1) All clergy are encouraged to engage in counseling, individually and as a couple, toward maintaining health and wellness. When a clergy marriage is facing difficulty, counseling is especially needed. Clergy may receive guidance in connecting with Behavioral Health Services through the North Georgia Conference Benefits Office or the Center for Clergy Excellence.

2) The clergyperson shall promptly notify his/her District Superintendent (DS) when either they or their spouse are considering divorce. This notification should occur prior to engaging an attorney or filing for divorce through a court of law. Timely notification reflects the clergy person's consideration of the marriage, the ministry, the congregation and the conference, as well as himself or herself.

3) The DS shall convene a supervisory meeting with the clergyperson. The spouse is encouraged to attend this meeting, if possible. The clergy person will provide contact information for the spouse. A second DS, selected by the clergyperson, must be present during the supervisory process. (The second DS will focus on taking the minutes for the meeting and offering feedback when solicited.) The clergyperson, spouse, and superintendents shall discuss the following:

- a.) Circumstances leading to consideration for divorce. Perspectives will include both parties if both are present.
- b.) Whether there has been any immoral or inappropriate behavior on the part of the clergyperson which leads to the decision to divorce.
- c.) What options are present for the care and healing of this immediate family?
- d.) Referral of the clergy and spouse to the Conference Benefits Officer to discuss benefits after divorce, as well as updates to essential information (e.g., next of kin/beneficiaries for life insurance and pension).

4) The clergy person shall submit a plan for personal and family healing no later than three weeks after the meeting. The DS will work collaboratively with the clergyperson to finalize a covenant of personal and family healing. Special considerations should be for the spouse and any children who, in addition to divorce, may also suddenly have no church home.

5) The clergyperson shall refrain from dating or entering a love relationship until one year after the divorce is final. He or she shall be advised to avoid dating a parishioner.

6) The superintendent will meet with the Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC) of the local church to discuss the divorce and healing options for the congregation. If the clergy is in an Extension Ministry, the DS meets with the personnel committee or a group identified by a board of directors.

7) Options for healing to the clergyperson and family:

- a.) Therapeutic Counseling
- b.) Financial Counseling through Ernst and Young (GBPHB)
- c.) Spiritual Growth Leave
- d.) Financial/Credit Counseling through a non-profit consumer credit counseling service
- e.) Voluntary Leave of Absence

8) Options toward healing of the local congregation:

- a.) A pastoral counselor to work with the SPRC and other key leaders to design a process of communication and conversation toward healing for the local church in the experience of divorce.
- b.) Ongoing consultation for the SPRC by the DS to monitor the church's response, healing, and adjustment to change as a result of the clergyperson's divorce.

9) Six to eight months after the initial meeting and/or prior to the next appointment-making season of the cabinet, the clergyperson must engage in a follow-up meeting (in-person or digitally) with the two DSs to discuss progress made toward healing and the impact of the divorce on the local church.

10) The DS shall write a progress report to be placed in the clergyperson's supervisory file. Documentation shall include a copy of the covenant for healing and updates on completion of the program for healing.

Be sure to save your changes at the end of the form.