

Ending Ministry Well

Contents

Document 1 – Ministerial Practices in Relation to a Former Parish (page 3)

Document 2 – Covenant of Closure (pages 4-5)

Document 3 – Guidelines and Assistance for Departing Pastors (pages 6-10)

Document 4 – Sample letter from the minister to the congregation (page 11)

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**MISSION PRESBYTERY
COMMITTEE ON MINISTRY**

A PRESBYTERY POLICY

MINISTERIAL PRACTICES IN RELATION TO A FORMER PARISH

(Note: Throughout this document, the term "pastor" may be taken to refer to Teaching Elders in installed and temporary relationships, and Ruling Elders commissioned to service in a particular congregation.)

PREAMBLE: Pastors leave churches for a number of reasons: retirement, illness, call to another congregation or ministry, a change of vocation. Whatever the reason, it will be a time of adjustment for the pastor and the congregation. This time of change provides opportunity for the highest ministerial ethics to prevail.

The pastor of a particular church shares that congregation's moments of joy, grief, struggle, victory, birth, life and death. These moments unite a minister and congregation in a unique and sacred fashion. However, this sacred relationship is only granted and honorable as long as the called clergy-congregation relationship is valid. The called relationship is not intended to be life-long. The pastor's and pastor's family friendships may last, but the pastoral relationship properly lasts only as long as the called clergy/congregation relationship exists. The rationale for this policy is to encourage, and not undermine, the transition necessary for the church and the development of the relationship between the congregation and a new pastor.

POLICY: The Committee on Ministry, therefore, requires all Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders Commissioned to particular pastoral service to abide by the *Book of Order*, G-2.0905.

After the dissolution of the pastoral relationship former pastors and associate pastors, shall not provide their pastoral services to members of their former congregation without the invitation from the moderator of the session.

All teaching elders shall sign and abide by the *Covenant of Closure* upon dissolution of the call to a particular church.

Former pastors, associate pastors and assistant pastors may be elected pastor emeritus/a. Mission Presbytery and its Committee on Ministry may give permission for this status to be awarded following consultation. This is an honorary title and carries no pastoral authority or duty.

IMPLEMENTATION:

1. At the session meeting at which the pastor's request for dissolution of call is presented, or as soon as practical thereafter, the departing pastor and a representative of the Committee on Ministry shall review this policy and the *Covenant of Closure* with the session. All parties shall then sign the *Covenant of Closure*.
2. The departing pastor shall inform the congregation through a personal letter (sample letter is attached) verbal announcements, bulletin, and newsletter announcements that when the severance day arrives the pastoral relationship between them has come to an end.

3. The departing pastor shall be guided by the *Covenant of Closure* when receiving invitations to provide pastoral services from the former congregation.

**MISSION PRESBYTERY
COMMITTEE ON MINISTRY**

COVENANT OF CLOSURE

To be completed by all departing pastors (installed, temporary, retiring including Pastor Emeritus/Emerita, Ruling Elders commissioned to particular pastoral service)

_____, Mission Presbytery,
Name of pastor

And the Committee on Ministry of Mission Presbytery having discussed the intent and requirements of the Presbytery's policy *Ministerial Practices in Relationship to a Former Parish* enter into the following covenant

1. I, _____ agree:
Name of pastor

a. not to involve myself in any leadership or advisory role (public or private) in the

Name and location of church

unless specifically invited to do so by the moderator of the session.

b. not to intervene, support or give advice to anyone involved in a congregational disagreement or dispute;

c. as a matter of professional courtesy, to establish an understanding with the new moderator of session regarding subsequent visits to the church, attending worship, or attending a special event;

d. not to officiate in any special events in the lives of former parishioners or of the congregation, including weddings, funerals, baptisms, worship leadership, church anniversary activities, etc., or to provide ongoing counseling services unless expressly invited by the moderator of the session;

It is understood that this policy does not affect or require the termination of friendships with individuals in the congregation.

2. The session and members of the _____ agree not to initiate pastoral or
Name of church

professional contact with the previous pastor by:

a. respecting the terms of the *Covenant of Closure* agreed upon by
_____ outlined above;

Name of Pastor

- b. interpreting the terms of the *Covenant of Closure* briefly in a letter to the congregation; and
- c. incorporating this agreement in the session minutes.

3. Mission Presbytery's Committee on Ministry shall:

- a. review and interpret this *Covenant of Closure* with the session;
- b. be the Presbytery's agent in reminding the parties to this *Covenant of Closure* of the principles of the covenant in the event any concerns are reported to it; and
- c. note this agreement in the minutes of the Committee on Ministry.

COVENANT OF CLOSURE

Pastor

Date

Clerk of Session

Date

Representative
Committee on Ministry

Date

Moderator of COM

Date

GUIDELINES AND ASSISTANCE FOR DEPARTING PASTORS MISSION PRESBYTERY

(Note: Throughout this document, the term "pastor" may be taken to refer to Teaching Elders in installed and temporary relationships, and to Ruling Elders commissioned to service in a particular congregation.)

CONTENTS

- PART I-Ethical Standards of the PCUSA
- Part II-Guidelines for Pastors Leaving Congregations (but not retiring)
- Part III-Guidelines for Retiring Pastors
- Part IV Social Media
- Part V Egregious Violation of Norms

PART I—ETHICAL STANDARDS

The 210th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted a paper entitled “Life Together in the Community of Faith: Standards of Ethical Conduct for Ordained Officers in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)” which have been found to contain words of wisdom for your future and they are commended to you. It says in part:

“I will conduct my ministry so that nothing need be hidden from a governing body of colleagues in ministry. Therefore I will:

- Deal honorably with the record of my predecessor and upon leaving ministry or office, speak and act in ways that will support the ministry of my successor;
- Participate in the life of a ministry setting I left or from which I have retired only as *directed by presbytery*.
- Provide pastoral services for a congregation I previously served only as *directed by presbytery* and provide pastoral services to members of other congregations only with the consent of its pastor.
- Consult with the Committee on Ministry in the presbytery of my residence regarding my involvement in any ministry setting during my retirement.”

The fundamental assumption in both the Constitution and the Ethical Standards is simply that the *long-term needs of a congregation must transcend the needs of any particular pastor* or the discomfiting circumstances of a particular pastoral transition. **Therefore, there is not expected to be any further pastoral relationship between the pastor or Ruling Elder commissioned to particular pastoral service and the former congregation.**

- **Why has this document been prepared?** To answer questions concerning the expectations of future connections between a pastor and congregation, and to provide

this information to aid pastors who are leaving and their family members as they plan and look toward the future.

- **What is the content of this paper?** Much of it concerns pastors who retire, with extra information for pastors who leave a church in Mission Presbytery and remain within its bounds as well as all members of the presbytery. These Guidelines do not provide for every circumstance. If further guidance is needed, please contact the COM Moderator or Presbytery Staff.
- **What will Mission Presbytery's Committee on Ministry do to assist departing ministers?** Prior to resignation/retirement, the departing pastor needs to contact COM. A member of COM will meet have a one-on-one conversation with him/her regarding standards and procedures.

In light of these assumptions and principles, the Committee on Ministry of Mission Presbytery provides the following Guidelines:

PART II—PASTORS WHO LEAVE

- **What sections of this document apply to pastors leaving congregations, but are not retiring?**
 - ✓ Part III—# 1; #2; #7a; b (shorter notice to COM and BoP is allowed); & c (1-3)
 - ✓ Part IV

PART III—RETIRING MINISTERS

1. What is the hope for the outcome of your retirement or new call?

The hope is for healthy and vital congregations, a smooth transition to new relationships for ministers and their families, and less confusion about appropriate roles for all.

2. What should a retiring minister think about?

The long-term needs of the congregation you will be leaving; the new pastor (transitional and/or called) who will take your place, and who needs time to form relationships within the congregation; the new life you and your loved ones will have.

You will need to rethink your relationship to church members. They will need to become *friends, not parishioners*. It will be your responsibility to explain this change and take the lead to implement it, so that NO church business is discussed after departure.

Leaving may likely involve the resignation of family members from church positions and activities and groups.

To make the new situation complete, it is wise for you and your family to leave your former church, albeit with grief, in prayer for God's blessings on your successor and the future of the congregation.

3. What should be understood about you, your family and your new circumstances as a retired minister?

There are differences between retiring and leaving a pastorate for a new call. Even though the decision to retire has been carefully made with God's guidance and in consultation with others, there may be grief for the pastor, the pastor's family members, and the congregation. The pastor and her/his family will be losing part of their identity as well as moving to a new church home. The congregation will be losing a familiar face and presence.

4. What can be best done for everyone in this circumstance?

With your prayers and God's guidance, search for and find a new church for you and your family. There are several options for continued ministry within a presbytery:

- ask to be on the presbytery pulpit supply list
- act as an interim or transitional pastor (check to see if transitional ministry education is required)
- take the opportunity to travel, move to be nearer to family, participate in a favorite avocation or learn/practice a new one

All creative ideas for changed lives and positive experiences that this new life will bring are encouraged.

5. What can be substituted for the call that is being relinquished?

Here are a few ideas:

- Enjoy worshipping in other PCUSA churches, other denominational churches and worship with those of other religions
- Start a small group, study with others, catch up on reading
- Become a Spiritual Director or Ministry Coach or Ministry Mentor
- Share a special hobby with others in adult education classes or in your community
- Take this time to write about your life experiences to share with family and with others
- Self-publish sermons and/or prayers
- Establish and write a blog
- Clear out and donate your pastor's library (seminary students and overseas seminaries may welcome such donations)
- Attend continuing education events

6. Is there an official role or status for a retired minister?

Yes, there are multiple places in which to offer your gifts of ministry.

- Becoming a Parish Associate Pastor in *another church*, after you have had an opportunity to explore and experience congregations in your vicinity (the Pastor

of the church needs to contact COM about this and secure a Contract form, as well as COM and Mission Presbytery approval)

- Ask the pastor of your new church if there is a need for help in the educational or pastoral care life of the church and if so, formulate a clear understanding of your role and responsibilities
- Befriend new pastors and ministers in the presbytery
- Offer your services to funeral homes to conduct services for unchurched families
- Set up a web site to offer your services to officiate weddings
- Serve on committees, task forces or administrative or disciplinary commissions of the Presbytery or volunteer your time for other presbytery needs
- Join ARMSS (Association of Retired Minister, Their Spouses and Survivors). It has annual convocations, a quarterly newsletter and local events throughout the year.

7. Are there RULES to be followed with regard to retirement?

Yes. They relate to helping congregations achieve a healthy bond with their new pastor.

- a. Consult with the Committee on Ministry. Six months' notice is ideal. The church's COM Liaison will meet with the session to answer questions when the pastor states the desire to leave or retire. A COM member will be present for the same purpose at the congregational meeting that is called to act on the leave-taking and to inform them of future plans.
- b. Consult the Board of Pensions. If retiring, a three months minimum notice is ideal. That contact can be made through the BoP's Area Representative (see the PCUSA calendar for contact info) or via the Presbytery staff.
- c. (1) Relinquish all former pastoral duties. There are some special occasions in which the congregation may desire its former pastors to be present (e.g. church anniversaries). If the Moderator of session requests your presence, you are welcome to attend. Without the invitation of the Moderator of the session, it is not appropriate for former pastors to officiate at baptisms, weddings or funerals, no matter the location, as this would interfere with the congregation's ability to form bonds with its new leadership. It would also prevent the retired or former pastor from enjoying the new status elsewhere.
(2) Why is this good protocol? Although the Book of Order allows for invitations, that provision often places a difficult burden on the new pastor. It is very hard to refuse requests from family members or even the former pastors without appearing to be ungracious—though refusing such an invitation may be the wisest choice as the congregation and its members make their transition into the future. Once the Moderator of the session says "Yes", to the first request, it is difficult to draw the line on additional requests as they emerge. *The best response for the former or retired pastor is to decline all requests for pastoral services consistently.*

- (3) Is there any time in which a former or retired pastor may attend worship in the previous church? A former pastor who follows good protocol will contact the Moderator of session to ask permission to attend worship including baptisms, weddings and funerals. If the current pastor's answer is negative, the former pastor needs to accept such an answer graciously. Often the successor pastor will give an affirmative answer, because the former pastor has displayed sensitivity and good protocol.
- d. All financial or property ties to the congregation *should be concluded* at the time of leave-taking, which includes payment of a mortgage that a congregation may have provided.
- e. Participation with a Pastor Nominating Committee's functions is not allowed, unless an unusual request by the Committee on Ministry is made.

PART IV—SOCIAL MEDIA

The former pastor bears the primary responsibility for structuring and maintaining new boundaries with members of the former congregation. The Social Media Guidelines apply for those leaving and those staying in Mission Presbytery. The Guidelines are:

- ❖ It is appropriate to refrain from phone calls, emails and the use of all other social media related to the business of the former congregation.
- ❖ Send a FINAL email to make it clear when you will or have ended your work with the congregation. Emphasize that you will not be participating in the congregation's social media, no matter who initiates the contact and that this is in keeping with well-established PCUSA policies intended to aid the congregation's transition to new pastoral leadership. A final word of thanksgiving and blessing would be an appropriate ending to the final email.
- ❖ Remove yourself from internal church communication lists, groups, docs, etc. on Google, Yahoo and other sharing platforms where you represented the church ex-officio.
- ❖ Delete any groups or lists that you created that set aside congregational members in your news and updated streams
- ❖ Have your administrative access removed from all congregational social platforms. This may include having the church change its passwords and other access points.

PART V—EGREGIOUS VIOLATIONS OF NORMS

If there is evidence of egregious violation of the norms in these Guidelines, a member of or team from Committee on Ministry will meet with the involved parties.

Sample Letter to a Congregation on Dissolution of Pastoral Relations:

Mission Presbytery's Policy for the Dissolution of Pastoral Relations states that the pastor who is leaving *shall send a letter to the congregation which should include: a statement of appreciation for the opportunity to have served the congregation and the pastor's plans for his/her new call/retirement, the effective date of the dissolution, a reminder to the congregation that after the pastor's relationship is dissolved, no further pastoral services shall be provided including baptisms, weddings, funerals, hospital calls, etc..*

Here is an example of what such a letter might contain (adapted to fit particular circumstances):

My dear friends in Christ,

As I'm sure you have already heard, I will be retiring/moving to a new congregation as of date. While I am anticipating this change with excitement (maybe give some reasons for this excitement—moving closer to family, new ministry challenges, time with grandchildren, etc), I also know that I will miss you tremendously.

It has been such a privilege to serve the Lord with you here at name of congregation for these last number years. It has been such a joy to me to watch _____ /participate with you in _____ / see _____ happen, and I will be praying that God will continue to bless you in the years ahead. I would also appreciate your prayers for me (and my family) in this time of transition.

While I will always hold you with love in my heart, and while I will cherish the memories of our years together, I will no longer be your Pastor. Again, I will pray for you, and I will think of you as dear friends, but I will no longer be able to perform any Pastoral duties among you (baptisms, hospital calls, weddings, funerals) after date.

In a year or so you will welcome a new Pastor to serve the Lord with you. My hope is that you will welcome him/her with the same grace you have always shown to me. I believe God has great things ahead for name of congregation, which you will discover as you move into the future with joy and hope.

With gratitude and deep affection,