

# CONSIDERATIONS FOR RETIRING PASTORS

The Commission on Ministry  
of Salem Presbytery  
adapted from the  
Presbyteries of Carlisle and Western North Carolina

The Commission on Ministry has pastoral responsibility for all the minister members and congregations of the Presbytery. This responsibility needs to be exercised with special care during periods of pastoral leadership transitions. One such period of transition is the retirement of a minister. When that retirement is from a ministry over which the Presbytery has jurisdiction (such as a pastorate or a Presbytery staff position), then the COM must assist the completion of the ministry in such a way that encourages health and wholeness for everyone.

One of the tensions inherent in ministry is that ministers serve churches and are not officially a member of a local congregation. Membership in the Presbytery may fill the membership void. The pastor's family, however, often become members of the congregation which the pastor serves. At the point of retirement from pastoral ministry there may be a sense of loss for the pastor's spouse (and perhaps also for grown children who have remained in the congregation) which differs from any loss experienced by the pastor. While a minister's family does not lie within the COM's jurisdiction, it does lie within the scope of our Christian concern. In the hope of loving one another as Christ loves us, the COM has crafted a policy of pastoral care toward all ministers facing retirement as well as their families, to encourage them in their Christian pilgrimage and to assist the people in the ministry from which they are retiring. Our hope is to move the people forward in the ministry so that they can enjoy the fruits of all past service and anticipate fresh gifts from new servants of God.

## OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION

The retirement of a pastor is a time of joy, thanksgiving, stress, and anxiety for the congregation, pastor, and her/his family.

The Congregation may have built loyalties and deep meaningful relationships with the pastor. The members wonder: can't we call on our former pastor from time to time to serve in various special occasions and needs if s/he is nearby? How will we get a new pastor? Will our choice be wise? What will be our congregation's spirit and character in this new venture? How will we relate to this new person? How will we function in the interim?

The Pastor retires and faces a substantive change in her/his life. Since ordination the pastor has been accustomed to being a center of attention, having a congregation that loves, cares for, and depends on them. The pastor is used to being the leader of the session and boards, a key decision maker and a guide of the mission and spiritual life of the congregation. When that is suddenly removed it is the death of a major aspect of the pastor's life, a time of mourning. Few anticipate what a potentially radical reorientation of life, of the sense of call, and of the sources of self-esteem and fulfillment that may ensue. While retirement has many rewards and the potential for new modes of personal fulfillment, for some, the transition to retirement can be threatening and difficult. Retirees may experience feelings of loss in retirement, and to deny these feelings can exacerbate the pain of separation. It is no wonder that some retiring pastors are tempted to hold on to past relationships and roles to the detriment of the congregation, its new pastor, and the discovery of a new role in life for the retiree. A good guideline is for pastors to absent themselves from the former congregations for at least 2 (two) years following the installation of the next pastor.

The Pastor's Family may also discover that the change occasioned by their family member's retirement from the pastorate is difficult and at times painful. Their sense of loss and shift of "status" and focus may be profound. Their situation may focus on three questions:

1. Where to live?
2. Where will their church membership be?
3. How to handle church-related relationships?

If they move to a new community the adjustment of the former pastor and her/his family to their new life might be easier than remaining in the community of the pastorate. Their role in a new community and new church is entirely different from their years of experience in the pastorate. In the new church of membership, they can be on the same social level as all other members. They are free to relate directly and freely with members of the new church and to share their gifts in the governance and programs of the church. They can also be friend and support to their new pastor. As a congregational participant, the retiring pastor can now sit back, enjoy, and be fed by worship without feeling s/he must manage the service.

If the family members remain in the same community as the retiree's former pastorate, there is no rule that says the family must give up its present church membership. If they choose to retain membership where the retiree served, the family's closest friends are often in that congregation, but the family's relationship with the congregation changes. Their friends need to be free to develop a relationship with the new pastor (and perhaps spouse) just as they did when the retired pastor first came to the church.

Any continuing relationship needs to be extremely judicious and restrained in conversation about the church from which the pastor retired. A successful return by the family (including the former pastor) to the former church requires:

1. a full and open discussion and express agreement of the installed pastor regarding the requested return,
2. a secure and supportive atmosphere for new pastor,
3. the retired pastor's willingness to switch from being the shepherd to being one of the flock, and
4. the judicious and tactful refusal of the retiree and retiree's family to become involved in any discussion of the church's policies or problems.

While adult children might remain in the congregation, they too will need to exercise restraint and grace as they relate to the new pastoral leader and the changes s/he will bring about. If they hold office in the church, they must be ready to be supportive and accepting of the new pastor. On the other hand, if they feel they must stay on to protect their parent's legacy and program, they should consider resigning.

The family should be preparing for this radical change in its life well in advance of retirement. Retirement planning workshops offered by the PCUSA's Board of Pensions are excellent resources for those seeking to plan for their retirement from active pastoral leadership. (<https://www.pensions.org/your-path-to-wholeness/lifelong-learning-through-board-university/seminars/THRIVE>)

Finally, the Presbytery through its Commission on Ministry should be consulted for guidance and support to the retiring pastor and family, as well as the session and congregation, as they confront this "fork in the road" of their mutual spiritual pilgrimage.

## **POLICY REGARDING THE RELATIONSHIP OF RETIRED MINISTERS AND THEIR FORMER CONGREGATIONS**

1. Building and maintaining healthy relationships between pastors and congregations is our top priority.
2. Retiring pastors refrain from any contact with their former parish and its members which is or may be interpreted as pastoral until the next installed pastor has been in place for at least two years.
3. In accordance with Book of Order G-2.0905, “former pastors and associate pastors shall not provide their pastoral services to members of their former congregations without the invitation of the moderator of session”. Any requests to provide pastoral services directed to the moderator of the session shall be minimal and without undue pressure or manipulation.
4. While it is preferred that the spouse and other family members leave the church with the departing pastor, there may be circumstances which allow exceptions and lead to the family remaining as participants in the congregation formerly led by the departing pastor.<sup>1</sup> The family shall endeavor to be circumspect regarding the changes arising from transitions of pastoral leadership.
5. When former pastors live in the same community as their last church all contacts with the former church and its members shall be limited.
  - A. The former pastor should decline pastoral leadership in any funerals, baptisms, counseling, weddings, etc., of their former parish. By declining such invitations firmly and without equivocation, the former pastor shall clarify that he/she is no longer that person’s pastor and shall refer the requesting individual to the pastoral care and services of the new pastor.
  - B. In limited instances where ongoing relationships are permitted, the retired pastor shall refuse to provide any services that might be deemed pastoral in nature. Any personal, non-pastoral social engagements shall seek to follow – not precede – the visitation of the new pastor.
  - C. It is strongly recommended that the former pastor and their family become active in the work and worship of another congregation. If there are no options for other church membership and participation, COM should be consulted.
6. The retiring pastor shall cease any social media contact with members and staff of the former parish to maximum extent possible. Commenting or liking posts is inappropriate.
7. It is permissible to accept an invitation from the newly installed pastor to participate and/or assist in some special event or program in the former parish after the new pastor has been present for at least one year.

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples are the presence of only one Presbyterian church in the community where the family continues to live, the spouse remaining in place for some event to resolve family matter (end of school year, career decisions, selling a house, etc.), the spouse being an injured party resulting in a pastor’s removal, and other infrequent situations. Refer to “Salem Advisory Guidelines on Dual Relationships” for guidance.

8. When the previous pastor happens to encounter former parishioners, their response should indicate that although church members and the church continue to be prayed for, it is not appropriate to talk about things happening in the church. They must be reminded that they have a new pastor and that their previous pastor no longer serves in that role.
9. Representatives of the Commission on Ministry shall review the COM handout, this policy statement, and the Covenant with both the pastor who is leaving/retiring and with the Session prior to the pastor leaving. The departing pastor, session and all program and support staff will be asked to sign the Covenant which should be shared with the congregation. A pastoral letter written by the Clerk of the Session regarding this policy and all relevant materials, including a copy of the Covenant, should be shared with the congregation at the time of the departing pastor's leaving.
10. Through its designated liaison the Commission on Ministry will be kept informed on the well-being of the church. In the event there are detrimental circumstances caused by either the retired pastor, the retired pastor acting through the family, or the family members themselves, COM shall undertake to enforce this Policy and seek to resolve such matters.

# **A COVENANT FOR OUR FUTURE**

## *An Understanding About the Future Relationship Between the Church and the Retiring/Departing Pastor*

### *Introduction*

The intention of this covenant is to function as a reminder of the importance of the relationship between pastor and congregation. To ensure a healthy transition from the current called pastor to future pastoral leadership, the congregation and departing pastor must exercise great self-restraint to allow time for the congregation to reflect on past ministry, dream about future ministries, and allow for a relationship with future pastoral leadership to flourish. How pastors and congregations say “Goodbye” is just as important as how they say “Hello” and “Welcome.” The whole church then - pastors, congregational leaders, and members - must model for one another healthy boundaries as roles and responsibilities change. To effectively and graciously maintain such boundaries requires both clarity and positive support.

A departing pastor is ethically responsible to do everything possible to strengthen the ties between new pastoral leadership and members of their former congregation. There are complexities that can and will influence the nature of this pastoral transition. Therefore, this Covenant creates space for all involved to appropriately grieve, reflect, and dream by acknowledging Salem Presbytery’s Policy Regarding the Relationship of Ministers to Their Former Congregations and agreeing to abide by its provisions.

### **WITH A POSTURE OF GRACE, UNDERSTANDING AND TRUSTING IN THE GUIDANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT . . .**

#### *We all covenant to . . .*

- Hold one another in prayer.
- Refrain from all intentional interaction online or in person during the transitional period and until at least two years after the installation of a new installed pastor, including online commenting, texting, phone calls, etc.
- Eliminate all social media connections and contacts that maintain a formal pastoral relationship that has been dissolved. Any social media contacts relating to normal friendships should be exercised with extreme caution not to violate any boundaries regarding discussion of the church and new pastor.

#### *The Session covenants to . . .*

- Pray for the emotional and spiritual well-being of the departing pastor as that person responds to God’s calling.
- No longer approach the departing pastor or the departing pastor’s family regarding issues of pastoral care, congregational life or future pastoral leadership.
- Welcome and embrace new pastoral leadership and joyfully engage in a process of discerning God’s calling for their future.
- Allow those in the congregation who are feeling a sense of loss to have adequate time to grieve the end of the departing pastor’s time with the church.
- Emphasize this commitment with members of the congregation.

*The Departing Pastor covenants to . . .*

- Pray for the emotional and spiritual well-being of the congregation as individuals and as the gathered community.
- Allow time to grieve the end of a pastoral and congregational relationship.
- Seek out a new worshiping home and fully participate in the life of the larger church.
- Bear the primary responsibility for maintaining healthy boundaries, refraining from and discouraging any interactions regarding issues of pastoral care, congregational life or future pastoral leadership.

**Social Media Challenge**

Obviously, as churches go through these social media enriched transitions, each person will need to decide how much he/she needs to be cut off from “exposure” to the activities of the departing pastor or the congregation. For some, this will require unfriending/hiding people, unfollowing or deleting contacts, but for most it will simply require extreme discipline to resist even the most innocent of interactions. We must not underestimate the power of the relationship between pastor and congregation. Time must be given for the relationship of the departing minister to lie fallow to allow the development of a relationship with the new pastor. This tension has always existed for random face-to-face interactions after a pastor leaves; social media has only heightened the frequency that these interactions might take place. The “line” over which we must not cross when it comes to pastoral transitions is wide and gray thanks to the expansive nature of social media.

*Consequently, the departing pastor agrees to:*

1. Communicate to the entire congregation, friends of the church, and staff so it is clear that although the departing pastor has greatly valued their friendships, the pastor desires and has covenanted not to be in communication regarding the congregation, its life, any pastoral care or discussion of future leadership, congregational issues or events. After departing a congregation, no conversations with former members should involve discussion/evaluation of the church, its status, or the new pastor.
2. Remove themselves from communication lists and groups involving the congregation and its members. Have access removed from all congregational social media platforms.
3. Make sure that parishioners know that her or his relationship with the congregation has come to an end. It is important that parishioners understand that this change of relationship is necessary in order that the congregation be free, in all respects, to make the adjustments necessary for changes of leadership, transitional, and permanent, without the departing pastor’s influence.

Receipt of the Retirement Handout, Presbytery Policy on Retired Ministers is acknowledged and the provisions thereof are agreed to:

Retiring Pastor / Date \_\_\_\_\_

Clerk of Session / Date \_\_\_\_\_