

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

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

The Commission on Ministry has pastoral responsibility for all the minister members of the Presbytery. That responsibility needs to be exercised with special care during periods of transition for the minister members. 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 show discretion in assisting 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, but they give up the privilege of being a member of a local congregation. For some, though certainly not for all, membership in the Presbytery fills the void that membership in a congregation fills for most other Christians. The pastor's family, however, usually become members of the congregation which the pastor serves. At the point of retirement from pastoral ministry there is, typically, a sense of loss for the pastor's spouse (and perhaps also for grown children who have remained in the congregation) which differs in quality from the loss experienced by the pastor. While a minister's family does not lie within the COM's jurisdiction, it does lie within our Christian concern. In the hope of loving one another as Christ loves us, the COM institutes a policy of pastoral care toward all ministers and their families around the time of retirement, both to encourage them in their Christian pilgrimage as well as to assist the people in the ministry from which the retirement is being made. Our hope is to move the people forward in the ministry so that they can enjoy the invigoration 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 has built loyalties and deep meaningful relationships with the pastor whether s/he has been there for a long or moderate length of time. 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 do we continue in the interim period?

The Pastor retires and faces a radical change in her/his life and for the family. Ever since ordination the pastor and family have 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 radical reorientation of life, of the sense of call and of the sources of self-esteem and fulfillment that change will require. While retirement has many rewards and the potential of new personal fulfillments, for many the transition to the new orientation can be threatening and difficult. To deny the feelings of loss only continues the pain. It is no wonder that some retiring pastors are tempted to hold on to past relationships and roles to the detriment of the congregation and its new pastor, as well as to the discovery of a new role in life for the retiree. A good guideline is for the pastor to absent themselves from the former congregation for at least 2 years following the installation of the next pastor.

The Pastor's Family also discovers that the change is difficult and at times painful. Their situation comes to focus in three questions:

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

If they move to a new community the adjustment of the former pastor and her/his family to their new life is made easier. 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 are on a level with all other members. They are free to relate directly and freely with members of the new church and to share their gifts in the affairs and structures of the church. The retiring pastor can now sit, enjoy, and be fed by worship without feeling s/he has to manage everything. They can also be friend and support to her/his new pastor.

If they stay in the same community there is no rule that says the family must give up its present church membership. If they retain membership where they have been, the family's closest friends are often in that congregation, however the family's relationship with the congregation changes. Their friends need to be free to develop a relationship to the new pastor and their spouse just as they did when the retiring couple first came to the church.

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

1. full and open discussion and agreement of the installed pastor regarding the return
2. a self-confident and non-threatened new pastor
3. the former pastor must genuinely be willing to switch from being the shepherd to taking her/his place as one of the flock
4. the judicious and tactful refusal of the former pastor and 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 restraint and grace as they relate to the new leadership 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. 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 the retirement.

The Presbytery and Commission on Ministry should give sufficient and clear guidance and support to the retiring pastor and family or the session and congregation at this point in their pilgrimage.

### SPECIFIC POLICIES FOR RETIRING PASTOR

1. A Retiring pastor must stay away from the former parish completely until the next installed pastor has been in place for at least two years.
2. In accordance with Book of Order G-2.0905 *Officiate by Invitation Only: After the dissolution of the pastoral relationship, 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.* This provision, however, places a great burden on the new pastor (moderator) in being the “gate-keeper” to the former pastor’s involvement. The COM hopes that our policy will take some of the pressure off the new pastor and place the ethical burden to maintain a distance upon the shoulders of the departing pastor. It is always incumbent upon the departing pastor to make sure that parishioners know that her or his relationship with the congregation will 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, interim and permanent, without the departing pastor’s influence.
3. 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. Some examples of this 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 (end of school year, career decisions, selling house, etc.), the spouse being the injured party in the removal of the pastor, and other less than ordinary situations (e.g. situations in which the spouse of the pastor remains as an employee of the church after the retirement or departure of the pastor – a very complex issue which usually requires outside intervention to resolve. Refer to “Salem Advisory Guidelines on Dual Relationships”) As outlined in other sections of this document with regard to pastoral contacts, the family will endeavor to be circumspect with regard to the naturally occurring changes. The Commission on Ministry will keep informed on the well-being of the church. In the event there are problems caused by either the departing pastor through the family or the family members themselves, COM will step in to resolve the issues.
4. It is not ordinarily appropriate to continue contact on any social media. This will involve un-friending/hiding people on Facebook, not following on Twitter and/or deleting contacts. For example, automatic birthday wishes should cease, as things like this continue to remind individuals about the wonderful pastor that left and their pastoral relationship. It will require extreme discipline to resist even the most innocent interactions.
5. When former pastors live in the same community -- either following retirement or in the case of a change of vocation/calling -- the potential for tension is greatly increased. The constant presence can unintentionally be a misleading reminder of a pastoral relationship that no longer exists. It increases the temptation to live in the past, or to bring issues and complaints to the former pastor. Therefore, special guidelines need to be established.

- A. The former pastor living in the same community as the church should decline pastoral leadership in any funerals, baptisms, counseling, weddings, etc., of their former parish. While this will be difficult, the departing pastor performs a much-needed pastoral service by encouraging and enabling church members to establish a pastoral bond with the new pastor through these life transitions. By declining such invitations firmly the former pastor clarifies that he/she is no longer that person's pastor and gives that person the opportunity to accept the pastoral care of the new pastor. Remember that if participation in official services is extended to some, it will be hurtful to those whose requests are refused.
  - B. There will be no visitation or contact with congregational members which could be interpreted in any way as pastoral. Any such visit "as a friend" should 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. Remaining in the same congregation can lead to tensions and difficulties which no one intends, but which nevertheless cannot be avoided. If there are no options for other church membership and participation, COM should be consulted.
  - D. It is permissible to accept an invitation from the new 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.
  - E. 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.
6. Representatives of the Commission on Ministry shall review this policy statement 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 a copy of the covenant should be shared with the congregation at the time of the departing pastor's leaving and the new pastor's arrival.

## **A COVENANT FOR OUR FUTURE**

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

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

A departing pastor is ethically responsible to do everything possible to strengthen the ties between the new pastor and members of their former congregation. There are complexities that can and will influence the nature of this particular pastoral transition.

The purpose of this covenant is to be forthright in our commitment to create space for all involved to grieve, reflect, and dream. It affirms agreement with Salem Presbytery’s Policy Regarding the Relationship of Ministers to Their Former Congregations.

### **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 on Facebook, “unfollowing” on Twitter and/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 to not 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, groups, etc., on e-mail, Google, Yahoo, Facebook, Twitter and other sharing platforms. Delete any groups or lists that involve congregational members in their news and updated streams. Have access removed from all congregational social media platforms.

Clearly, it is always incumbent upon the departing pastor to 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.

Departing Pastor / Date \_\_\_\_\_

Transitional Pastor/Date \_\_\_\_\_

New Installed Pastor/Date \_\_\_\_\_

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

Presbytery Staff Member / Date \_\_\_\_\_

COM Member / Date \_\_\_\_\_