

**POLICY REGARDING THE RELATIONSHIP OF DEPARTING MINISTERS  
TO THEIR FORMER CONGREGATIONS**

The Committee on Ministry  
Salem Presbytery  
adapted from the  
Presbytery of Western North Carolina

The Committee on Ministry recognizes that there are potentially difficult situations involving the relationship of a minister to his/her former congregation. In order to assist both the pastors and the congregations, the committee has adopted the following policies to assist pastors and congregations at this critical time of change.

A departing pastor is ethically responsible to do everything possible to strengthen the ties between the new pastor [bridge, transition, or installed] and members of his/her former congregation. While friendships with the departing pastor will surely continue, the pastoral relationship must not. This is an important distinction. It marks a boundary that is essential to the well being of the congregation as it moves forward under new pastoral leadership. Hence, such friendships must not impinge on any pastoral services that are the province of the new pastor, e.g. hospital visits, weddings, funerals, baptisms, counseling, or upon any policies of the church under the new pastor's leadership. Participation in these life events allows the new pastor to build his or her bonds of pastoral relationships.

Unfortunately, great harm has been done to congregations and new pastors [bridge, transitional, installed] when former pastors continue to be engaged in conversations with church members about the church, to be visible on church premises, or to be present at official church functions either in public settings or private homes. Often, neutral remarks by the former pastor can be interpreted as calling into question the experience or ability of the new pastor. The former pastor's participation in significant life events inhibits the ability of the new pastor to build pastoral bonds with members of the congregation.

**SPECIFIC GUIDELINES FOR A DEPARTING PASTOR**

1. A departing pastor must stay away from the former parish completely until the next installed pastor has been in place for at least a year.
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 Committee 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 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 his/her 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 his/her 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, his/her 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 Committee 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 pastors leaving and the new pastor's arrival.

### **A COVENANT FOR OUR FUTURE**

#### *An Understanding About the Future Relationship Between the Church and the 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 his/her 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 one year 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 they accept a new Call.
- 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 himself/herself 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, interim and permanent, without the departing pastor’s influence.

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

Interim Pastor/Date \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

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

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