Former Pastor Policy and Covenant of Closure

Introduction

The life of every congregation is punctuated by the coming and going of pastors. For both the Congregation and the Pastor, it is important for these transitions to take place in a healthy way. And because friendships are made between pastors and parishioners, it's important to clarify what makes for a healthy transition. While close relationships may continue, the roles change dramatically when pastors leave the congregation they have served.

When a pastor is called to serve a new congregation, he/she should be afforded every opportunity to build and nourish a vital pastoral relationship with his/her new faith community. To the degree to which a previous pastor continues to be involved in the life of the congregation, he/she stands, intentionally, in the way of the flourishing of the new pastorate. This policy exists to assist the new pastor and congregation at a critical time of change for the health of the congregation.

The former pastor is no longer the congregation's pastor and may not provide any pastoral services to the congregation or its members. This needs to be carefully discussed and completely understood by both the departing pastor and the congregation. The congregation must be made aware of the Covenant and why it is necessary. The departing pastor shall explain and affirm this policy to the congregation in writing and from the pulpit. The session must make sure that these policies are being adhered to.

The fundamental principle underlying this policy is that the long-term needs of a congregation transcend the needs of the departing pastor or the congregation's grief regarding this transition. The burden of responsibility of ensuring a healthy transition lies primarily with the pastor who is leaving, although such a transition demands empathy and maturity from all parties – the former pastor, the new pastor, the session, and members of the congregation. Every departing pastor is asked to sign the following covenant:

With the long term needs of the congregation in mind, as the former pastor, I agree that I will not:

- Worship with my former congregation without an invitation of the Moderator of Session.
- Be involved in any leadership or advisory role – public or private – including teaching in the former congregation.
- Be involved in conversations involving church business in the former congregation.
- Provide pastoral care to members of the former congregation.
- Officiate in any special events in the lives of former parishioners including weddings, funerals, baptisms, worship leadership, church anniversaries, church reunions, or staff retirements – either on church property or off site. When former pastors receive requests from former parishioners to participate in such events, they shall refer all requests to the current pastor whether the pastor is temporary/transitional or called and installed.

I agree that I will:

- Settle any outstanding loans or equity sharing arrangements in accordance with the loan or equity sharing agreement.
- Dispose of all pastoral counseling notes, personal records, etc. from church property by the last official day of my ministry with this congregation.
- Maintain new boundaries in the use of social media. (It is no longer appropriate to offer pastoral care on Facebook, for example.)
- Encourage my family members to consider joining another congregation. (Although the COM does not have jurisdiction over a pastor's family, it is our hope that the former pastor's spouse and family would not do anything to make the congregation's transition more difficult.)

Pastor Signature & Date _____

Clerk of Session Signature & Date _____

COM Representative Signature & Date _____

Frequently Asked Questions

Why can't the former pastor come back to officiate at weddings, funerals, etc.?

A new pastor – even in a transitional role – deserves the opportunity to form deep relationships with his/her new congregation. This is impossible if a former pastor continues to return for special family events because those are the very moments when pastors and congregants bond.

But what if our family had a special relationship with the former pastor?

Sometimes there might be circumstances in which it would be pastorally significant for the former pastor to assist the current pastor in a family event (weddings, funerals) or in a church event (baptisms.) If this is the case, the family must contact the current pastor before contacting the former pastor to discuss this. **Keep in mind, though, that these requests put the current pastor in an untenable situation**: If the current pastor says, "No" he/she is the bad guy. If the current pastor says, "Yes" it's really because they had no choice. It is healthier all around if church families simply refrain from inviting a former pastor "back" just for them. This also demonstrates that the family has a desire for this new chapter of their congregation's life and ministry to thrive which outweighs their personal preferences.

But what if our family event is not on church property? We would rather have our former pastor officiate at our daughter's wedding at a hotel than have the current pastor officiate in the sanctuary.

This, too, would break this covenant. Again, it is essential that the current pastor be allowed to indeed be the pastor. The former pastor is no longer in that role.

But what if the pastor's family is like family to us? Can the pastor's spouse still be part of the Bible study? Can the pastor's kids still come to our kids' birthday parties?

If the former pastor's family is still living in the area, friendships will probably continue. But keep in mind that continuing close friendships with the pastor's spouse and children could make it difficult for a new spouse and new children to assimilate into the church family.

Are there any exceptions?

There are times when the new installed pastor strongly desires that the former pastor and her/his family continue to participate in the life of the church. This could be for health or other reasons. But these exceptions are rare. Members of the Committee on Ministry can offer examples of such exceptions. It is

not helpful for the transitional pastor to invite the former pastor back because these first months are important for setting boundaries that will make the called and installed pastor's life easier.

Can the former pastor rejoin us after being gone for a year - or five years?
Sometimes a retiring pastor will tell the congregation that he/she will be back to worship regularly after a year or more has passed. This is not the decision of the former pastor. Former pastors always and only return – for worship, anniversary parties, staff events, etc – at the invitation of the current pastor.

Consequences for a former pastor not abiding by this covenant.

1. The former pastor will be contacted by a member of the COM Leadership Team and the General Presbyter and reminded of this agreement.
2. If the violation continues, the former pastor will receive a written notice that will be placed in the pastor's permanent file and will be required to meet with COM.
3. If the violation continues, formal disciplinary charges will be filed which may result in censure or other alternatives listed in the Book of Order D-12.0100.

*Exceptions to COM policies can be made if approved by the Leadership Team of COM, under extraordinary circumstances affecting the church and its leadership.