

Former Pastor Policy and Covenant of Closure
Presbytery of Western North Carolina - Committee on Ministry
Approved by the Committee on Ministry (12-4-2018)

Introduction

The life of every congregation is punctuated by the coming and going of pastors; and the professional life of most pastors is punctuated by several changes in positions. For both the congregation and the pastor, it is important for these transitions to take place in a healthy way. When a pastor is called to serve a new congregation, she/he should be afforded every opportunity to build and nourish a vital pastoral relationship with her/his 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 or unintentionally, in the way of the flourishing of the new pastorate. This policy exists to assist both pastors and congregations at this critical time of change.

This policy does not require that the former pastor move from the area or cast aside friendships within the previous congregation. The former pastor is simply no longer the pastor of the congregation and may not provide pastoral services to the congregation or its members. This is an important distinction which needs to be carefully discussed and completely understood by both departing pastor and congregation.

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 over the pastoral transition. The burden of responsibility for 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 the members of the congregation.

For the purposes of this policy, a “former pastor” is any pastor who once served a church in any pastoral capacity. This includes pastors who retire, resign, whose contract expired or whose call is dissolved by the Presbytery. For this purpose, the term “former pastor” applies to, but is not limited to, Installed Pastors, Interim Pastors, Stated Supply Pastors, Short-Term Supply Pastors, and Certified Christian Educators.

A Covenant Among the Parties

1. It is crucial that **all parties** to this Covenant of Closure understand its provisions and pledge to adhere to them. Representatives of the COM shall review this policy with the departing pastor and the Clerk of Session prior to the pastor leaving. This policy shall also be interpreted to the session and the congregation and included in session minutes. Each party must then affirm in writing the Former Pastor Policy/Covenant of Closure.
2. It is especially important that **the congregation** be made aware of the Covenant and why it is necessary. When the departure of an installed or temporary pastor is anticipated, a

representative of COM shall interpret the former pastor policy to the session and, in the case of an installed pastor, to the congregation as well. The session shall ensure that the COM letter regarding this policy is distributed to the congregation. The departing pastor, whether installed or temporary, shall explain and affirm this policy to the congregation in writing and from the pulpit.

3. In Presbyterian polity, the congregation is not alone as it works through the transition from one pastor to another. **The COM** shall offer support and guidance to the congregation and provide resources during this transition of pastoral leadership.

4. Neither is the departing pastor left adrift. In the case of a pastor's retirement, the COM, through its **Care Team**, shall demonstrate support and care of the retiring former pastor by conducting an exit interview, maintaining contact, offering opportunities for continuing service through the presbytery, encouraging the supportive fellowship with other retired clergy and informing the retiring pastor of appropriate books, seminars, and organizations that might assist in making a successful transition to retired life.

5. The dissolution of the former pastor's relationship with the congregation initiates a fundamental change in the relationship between the former pastor and the congregation. After that dissolution, **the former pastor** shall not:

- a. worship with his/her former congregation without an invitation of the moderator of the session;
 - b. be involved in any leadership or advisory role, public or private, including teaching, in the former congregation;
 - c. be involved in conversations involving church business at his/her former congregation, but shall educate, remind, and encourage anyone who expresses a concern to talk directly to their pastor, take the issue to Session, and/or approach the COM if things still can't be resolved;
 - d. provide pastoral care to members of his/her former congregation;
 - e. officiate in any special events in the lives of former parishioners or of the congregation, including weddings, funerals, baptisms, worship leadership, church anniversaries or reunions, unless expressly invited by the moderator of the session.
- When former pastors receive requests for pastoral services by former parishioners, they should refer all such requests to the current pastor.

The former pastor is expected to abide by the intent and requirements of Presbytery's "Code of Ethics" regarding former pastors. Outstanding loans and equity sharing arrangements are to be settled in accordance with the loan or equity sharing agreement. Such loans are part of the terms of call of the pastor, and any forgiveness of such loans, unless provided for in the loan documentation, constitutes a change in call that must be approved by the congregation and the presbytery. The COM will be consulted prior to negotiating any such agreement. Definite plans should be made by the former pastor for the disposition of pastoral counseling notes, personal records, etc.

The former pastor is also responsible for establishing and maintaining new boundaries in the use of social networking and other online communication. Online communication should be limited to maintaining friendships and should exclude any interaction that might be interpreted as pastoral or involving church business.

6. **The session** is expected to do the following:

- a. to respect the terms of the policy agreed to by the former pastor;
- b. to interpret the terms of the policy to the congregation and incorporate this agreement in the minutes of the congregational meeting when the pastoral relationship is dissolved; and
- c. to incorporate this agreement in the session minutes.

7. Any request to engage a former pastor in the ministry of his/her former congregation remains entirely within the authority of **the new pastor**. When a former pastor remains in the community, the new pastor may ask for the insight and services of the former pastor, but the congregation may not. The new pastor shall determine if and when to request the services of the former pastor.

8. **If this policy is violated** by the former pastor, in the judgment of the COM, the Stated Clerk or the General Presbyter, the following steps will be taken:

- a. The former pastor will be contacted by representatives of COM and reminded of this agreement.
- b. 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.
- c. A third violation will result in formal disciplinary charges being filed which may result in censure or other alternatives listed in D-12.0100.

The Former Pastor's Family

When a former pastor remains in the community—especially upon retirement— a concern arises for the needs of other family members, particularly the pastor's spouse. Quite often family members have joined the church their spouse/parent was serving, have become very involved in congregational programs, invested great interest and energy in the church's life, and established deep personal relationships with other church members. It is strongly recommended, however, that the former pastor and his/her family seek to become active in the work and worship of another congregation. It is acknowledged that the Presbytery has no direct jurisdiction over the non-clergy members of pastors' families and that there may be circumstances which call for exceptions. In this case, the Presbytery urges the former pastor's spouse and family not to do anything that would undermine the transition necessary for the church and the development of the relationship between the congregation, an interim pastor, and a new called pastor. As it is appropriate, the pastor's family will be included in retirement planning, discussions, workshops and seminars.

