

Former Pastor Policy and Covenant of Closure

Presbytery of Western North Carolina - Commission on Ministry

Approved by COM on April 1, 2025

***Note:** 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, Installed Associate Pastors, Interim Pastors, Stated Supply Pastors, Short-Term Supply Pastors, and Commissioned Pastors.*

Introduction

The life of every congregation is punctuated by transitions with the coming and going of pastoral leadership. 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, the new pastor should be afforded every opportunity to build and nourish a vital pastoral relationship with their new faith community. When a former pastor remains involved in the life of the congregation, they can hinder (whether intentionally or not) the growth and success of the new pastorate. This policy exists to assist both pastors and congregations with pastoral changes.

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.

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.

In Presbyterian polity, the congregation is not alone as it works through the transition from one pastor to another. The presbytery’s Commission on Ministry (COM) shall offer support and guidance to the congregation and provide resources during this transition of pastoral leadership.

A Covenant Among the Parties

1. It is crucial that all parties to this Former Pastor Policy/Covenant of Closure understand its provisions and pledge to adhere to them. The following steps are to take place:
 - a. A representative of COM shall review this policy with the departing pastor and with the session prior to the pastor leaving. A copy of the policy will be included in the session minutes prior to the pastor leaving.
 - b. The COM representative and the session shall ensure that the Former Pastor Policy/Covenant of Closure is interpreted to the congregation prior to the pastor leaving and included in the minutes of the congregational meeting when an installed pastoral relationship is dissolved.

- c. The session shall ensure that the Former Pastor Policy and Covenant of Closure is distributed to the congregation.
 - d. The departing pastor will also explain and affirm this policy to the congregation both in writing and from the pulpit.
 - e. The representative of COM, the departing pastor, and the Clerk of Session shall affirm their agreement by signing the Former Pastor Policy/Covenant of Closure.
2. There shall be an exit interview between the Presbytery and the departing pastor. In the case of a pastor's retirement, the COM shall demonstrate support and care of the retiring former pastor by maintaining contact, offering opportunities for continuing service through the presbytery, and encouraging the supportive fellowship with other clergy.
 3. 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 the former congregation without an invitation of the moderator of the session, in consultation with the session if needed;
 - 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 the former congregation, but shall educate, remind, and encourage anyone who expresses a concern to talk directly to the pastor, take the issue to Session, and/or approach the COM if things still can't be resolved;
 - d. officiate in any special events within the life of their former congregation including weddings, funerals, baptisms, worship leadership, church anniversaries or reunions, unless expressly invited by the moderator of the session. When a former pastor receives requests for pastoral services by former parishioners, the parishioners shall refer such requests to the current pastor.
 4. The former pastor is expected to abide by ethical conduct in these ways:
 - a. 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.
 - b. Definite plans should be made by the former pastor for the disposition of pastoral counseling notes, personal records, etc.
 - c. 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.

5. Any request to engage a former pastor in the ministry of the former congregation remains entirely within the authority of the new pastor. 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. We recommend a review of the relationship between the pastor, the congregation and the former pastor after the first year, or as needed by the COM.

6. If the COM, the Stated Clerk, or the General Presbyter determines that the former pastor has violated this policy, the following steps will be taken:

- a. The former pastor will be contacted in person by representatives of COM and reminded of this covenant of closure.
- 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 the former pastor's 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.

Affirmations for this Covenant of Closure

This policy describes the on-going relationship between a congregation and a former pastor. The policy does not expire after the passage of time. It is expected that this policy, except as noted, will be monitored by the Commission on Ministry.

I, the Pastor of _____ Church, agree to abide by this policy and Covenant of Closure.

Signature, Pastor

Date

The Session of Church agrees:

- a. to incorporate this Covenant of Closure in the Session minutes;
- b. to interpret the terms of the Covenant to the congregation; and
- c. to respect the terms of the Covenant.

Signature, Clerk of Session

Date

Signature, COM Representative

Date