

RELATION OF FORMER PASTORS TO CONGREGATIONS

Ministerial Ethics:

Toward just, smooth, and healthy transitions as Pastors leave Congregations

Committee on Ministry

Presbytery of the James

Few circumstances in their professional lives challenge pastors to exercise more wisdom and judgment than the ones raised when leaving a congregation. Somewhat ironically, the most difficult transitions are often those involving congregations in which the pastor has been warmly loved and appreciated. In addition to making a professional move, the pastor and her/his family are leaving supportive friends and community. The dynamics of the transition involve many in addition to the pastor and family, including the congregation, the session and staff, and certainly the new pastor or interim pastor who will soon begin to fill the void. When the transition involves the retirement of a pastor who elects to remain in the community, and perhaps even in the community of the church, the issues become even more complex and challenging.

The *Book of Order* offers brief, but important guidance in the matter of transitions: (G-14.0606) “*Former pastors, associate pastors, and assistant pastors may officiate at services for members of a particular church, or at services within its properties, only upon invitation from the moderator of the session or in case of the inability to contact the moderator, from the clerk of session*”. These guidelines refer to any former ministerial relationship with a congregation as defined in G-14.0500 (i.e., pastor, associate pastor, designated pastor, co-pastor, interim pastor, stated supply pastor, temporary supply pastor, parish associate, organizing pastor, etc.)

While such transitions involve a number of entities (i.e. sessions, congregations, etc.), COM believes that the burden of responsibility for creating a healthy transition lies primarily with the professional behavior of the pastor who is leaving. Pastors must view the process of separation and transition as perhaps a final, but critical part of their ministry to the congregation they have served. Not to do so and act accordingly is a violation of professional ethics.

Practically, the exiting pastor must work to educate the session and congregation on the Presbyterian understanding of the transition. She/he ought to take great care in expressing her/his support of the process and the role that Presbytery plays in it. Emotionally and spiritually, the exiting pastor can play a positive role in the welcome the interim or installed pastor will receive. Explaining the process and the reasons for it will also assist the exiting pastor in drawing and maintaining proper boundaries. Not unimportantly, the former pastor who works to make a good and positive transition also leaves the congregation with a final and selfless example of the love and care of the Good Shepherd for the beloved flock.

The following are brief guidelines based on the *Book of Order*, and growing out of the experience of the COM. Representatives of the Church and Pastor Committee of the COM shall review this policy statement with each minister who is leaving/retiring from a congregation in the POJ. The information below will also be presented to the Session of the congregation effected by the move (prior to the election of a PNC) as a part of the transition meeting conducted by the Stated Clerk. In addition, a pastoral letter regarding these guidelines shall be shared with the congregation. (A sample letter and liturgy crafted by the Committee is attached).

I. Guidelines

- A. When Presbytery dissolves the pastoral relationship, that relationship is ended. Only the pastor duly installed by Presbytery, or the pastor approved by the Presbytery for temporary service, is authorized to perform pastoral duties among a particular congregation.
- B. The former pastor should not participate in any funerals, weddings, etc., of her/his former parish. Also, There should be no visitation or contact which could be interpreted in any way as pastoral. This will be difficult, but if the first invitation is accepted, there will be no reason to refuse other requests.
- C. The only acceptable exceptions to “B” are those mentioned in the Book of Order, G-14.0606. Certainly during the first year, it is advisable to refrain from all pastoral contact.
- D. In the case of a pastor who retires in the same community as her/his former church, COM strongly recommends that the former pastor and her/his 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 nevertheless cannot be avoided.
- E. Simple sensitivity and courtesy ought to rule. Pastors who violate the guidelines and return to a previous congregation are showing disregard for the minister or interim in place there. The congregation that insists on inviting a previous pastor to perform duties shows little respect for the person currently serving them.
- F. Concerns or complaints regarding these issues shall be directed to the Church and Pastor Committee for resolution. In the event that a satisfactory resolution is not achieved, the matter will be forwarded to the Moderator of the COM.
- G. Upon receiving the unresolved complaint, the Moderator of COM and two others COM members shall meet with the person alleged to have violated the privilege of the pastoral relationship. Should they find the complaints valid, and should the practice continue, the matter may be brought before the entire COM. The former pastor may be subject to censure according to the Rules of Discipline.

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A sample letter to be sent by a pastor leaving a congregation

Dear Congregation,

I am writing this with all the mixed emotions that necessarily are a part of saying good-bye to folks who have been important in my life. Soon I will no longer be your pastor as I (begin my retirement) take up that task in another place. I leave confident that God will continue to care for and meet all your needs. An interim pastor will soon be present to serve as your pastor and “prepare the way” for a permanent pastor to come and lead you into a new chapter of your life together.

Leaving a congregation that has become dear is not easy. I know that in the days to come, I will continue to “feel” like your pastor. There is something of grieving in this. It will be tempting to try to keep up with the life of Plainville Church—the community of faith of which my own life was so much a part. I suspect that some of that same thing might be true on your part as well—that it will take some time before someone else becomes “pastor”.

We can serve each other in this. Our presbytery has had a good deal of experience in this business of “saying good-bye” to a pastor. We have developed good guidelines—good boundaries—that can help us both to do this in a way that brings honor to the ministry I have tried to do among you and to bring closure and health to the church. Most basic in the guidelines is the simple reminder that when a pastor leaves a congregation, it marks the end of that relationship. Not the end of love for each other, but of necessity, the end of our former relationship. I may not involve or insert myself in any part of the life of Plainville church. Not as a theological guide. Not as an advisor in any matter. Not for weddings or funerals. Not even to visit someone in the hospital.

If that seems harsh, it truly is not so. Rather, experience has taught that when a pastorate is ended, the responsibility of leadership and care must end as well. For the sake of the pastor leaving a field, but even more, for the sake of the church that is about the task of building bonds with a new interim or permanent pastor. Not easy, but so very important.

I hope you welcome your interim pastor with the same warm and love that enveloped me when I arrived as a stranger among you. I will try to honor you by (focusing my energy on the new life in retirement than God is offering now) giving my new congregation all my focus and energy—and sharing with them what you have taught me about being a pastor.

Sincerely,