

Policy for Pastors and Churches Following the Conclusion of a Pastoral Relationship

PREAMBLE

From study of Scripture regarding God and God's activity, Christian theology normally has a strong relational component. We understand the relational nature of God both from God's covenant with Israel and God's Incarnation in Jesus Christ. Christians are called not only into relationship with God, but also relationship with other people. Jesus' summary of the law pointed to both dimensions "love God ... and love your neighbor as yourself."

The Church provides the arena in which to practice relationships as they are intended to be lived. That arena is intended to be a safe place, a healing place, a place of growing and maturing, and a place of learning. Pastors as well as the people are engaged in relationships which grow in depth over the years.

The congregation for its part has built loyalties and meaningful relationships with the Pastor. Sometimes there are significant friendships. The longer the pastorate has been, the more likely there is an element of dependence on the person and style of the retiring/resigning pastor. While some may be happy to see a change in leadership, many will experience feelings of deep anxiety about the change, as well as grief over losing a personal counselor and confidant.

Pastors themselves may not anticipate the impact of retirement. The setting aside of leadership and caring responsibilities may be experienced as the death of a major aspect of the pastor's life. Retirement does provide many rewards and the freedom to explore new goals and opportunities. However, for some, the transition can be threatening and difficult. But one of the most important challenges is the redefining of one's role, especially in relationship to former members.

We often overlook the impact of retirement on the pastor's family. If they move to a new community and new church, they will probably experience a different kind of transition, and different role from their years of experience in the pastorate. They are not welcomed into a new community by a congregation anxiously awaiting them. In the new church of membership they are on a level with all other members and have no automatic status which, in varying degrees, they likely experienced previously. On the other hand, the retiring pastor can now learn to sit, enjoy and be fed by worship without feeling she/he has to manage everything. The family may find that a plus and experience each other as being more fully present.

However, boundaries are important to every context including Christian community. "Good fences make good neighbors" can be carried too far. But common understandings of mutually agreed upon boundaries can work to the benefit of all parties concerned. Whether the pastor retires in the same community, or preferably in a different community, there needs to be some intentionality about new roles and relationships between the pastor and the congregation. Therefore, in the spirit love and understanding, these guidelines have been adopted by Trinity Presbytery.

When a pastoral position with a congregation ends, there are bonds of affection between the minister and members of the church that continue to be cherished. Relations of friendship continue, but the pastoral relationship does not. In order to avoid awkward situations and to encourage the new pastoral relationship that will be established, the Presbytery establishes the following guidelines.

1. It shall be the policy of Trinity Presbytery to require that the following statement be placed in the newsletter and/or bulletin when the pastor announces his/her plan to retire or to leave:

“When a pastor resigns from a pastorate, retires from service, or becomes pastor Emerita/us, Trinity Presbytery urges that minister to decline invitations such as weddings, baptisms, funerals, hospital visitation or counseling from his/her former congregation members. Active or inactive church members should not request that a former pastor perform pastoral duties. If, in spite of this policy, an invitation is extended or accepted, former pastors, associate pastors and other ministers “shall not provide their pastoral services to members of their former congregation without the invitation of the moderator of the session.” G-2.0905. This policy of Trinity Presbytery is intended to help former ministers and the congregations who love them prepare to embrace the next chapter in their lives, and to clear the way for the next installed pastor to minister to the needs of the congregation entrusted to his/her care.

While avoiding participation in any funerals, weddings, baptisms, etc., of former parishioners is difficult, it should be remembered that if the first invitation is accepted, reasons to refuse other requests will be very difficult to substantiate. If the circumstances of the minister’s departure make it advisable for the health of the congregation, the Session may elect to allow the departing pastor to perform any weddings that were approved prior to the Pastor’s resignation/announcement of retirement. However, baptisms, funerals, weddings planned following the pastor’s announcement of departure, and other pastoral duties should be refused by the departing pastor.

2. Prior to the Pastor’s exit, the Committee on Ministry representative will discuss this policy with the pastor and clerk of session. Such a discussion is best done face to face, but may be conducted by phone. Both the departing pastor and the clerk of session (after discussion with the whole session) should sign the attached “Acknowledgment of Policy...” form. It is also recommended that the COM representative meet with the pastor, spouse, and, if appropriate, adult members of the pastor’s family to discuss issues of separation and how they might be considered and implemented. Presbytery urges the spouse, in the context of those relationships not to do anything which would undermine the transition necessary for the church and the development of the relationship between the congregation and a new pastor or interim pastor. Further counseling may be provided the family by the COM to assist in the separation.
3. As an issue of personal integrity, the pastoral challenge to the minister leaving a church is to project not only an acceptance of the policy of the Presbytery, but also endorsement of it.

4. Announcing retirement/resignation too far in advance can be disruptive to the effective functioning of the church. Not allowing enough time between the announcement and leave taking may not provide adequate time for closure and intensify the grief process for all parties involved. A reasonable lead time for announcing retirement normally may be 3 to 5 months. A reasonable lead time for leaving for other reasons is normally 4 – 6 weeks.
5. The pastor should prepare for retirement or resignation by beginning to reduce the pastoral duties and to clean his/her personal belongings out of the church office at least one month prior to the date of retirement/resignation. No later than the effective date of dissolution of the pastoral relationship, all keys to church properties shall be turned in to the clerk of session or a designated representative of the presbytery. All exceptions to this policy must be approved by the session of the church in consultation with the COM. In some cases a symbolic and public gesture [such as a public opportunity to “turn over the keys to the church office”] may help the congregation make the necessary mental transition.
6. There shall be no more visits of a pastoral nature after the effective date of dissolution of the pastorate, nor shall there be visits to the worship service on the part of the now “former pastor” especially if the pastor continues to live or work within commuting distance from the dissolved relationship. Every effort to connect with another church family should be made by the departing pastor and his/her family. If, after a space of four or five years, the pastor wishes to return to that congregation to worship, he/she shall ask permission of COM and the Church’s Session to return as a part of that worshipping community.
7. When a former pastor moves from the community, it is a professional courtesy for the previous pastor to notify the new pastor, when he/she is visiting in the area. Caution is advised with regard to frequent visiting of friends in an old parish. And always it is expected that the former pastor will refrain from engaging in conversations or communications about matters of church business or evaluations of new staff.

8. Pastor Emeritus/Emerita

We acknowledge there are some double messages to a congregation and a minister when the church and Presbytery name that person pastor emeritus/emera and then the Presbytery asks the pastor emeritus/emera not to be involved in pastoral functions. It is expected that the retired/resigning minister will actively discourage former parishioners if they issue invitations for his/her service. The church needs his/her help to exercise restraint to establish a healthy nurturing relationship with its new leader(s). Furthermore the Presbytery strongly recommends that a Pastor not be elected Emeritus/Emerita until a year has elapsed following the Pastor’s departure.

After the one-year anniversary of the installation of a new pastor, if a congregation is moved by affection and gratitude to continue an association in an honorary relationship with a previous pastor, the congregation may, at a regularly scheduled congregational meeting, consider such a designation. This action shall be taken only after consultation with the Committee on Ministry of the presbytery concerning the wisdom of this relationship for the peace of the church. The required congregational vote shall be two-thirds. After the congregational vote, if passed, the Session shall submit the request in writing to the Committee on Ministry for approval by the Presbytery. This action shall be subject to the approval of Presbytery.

9. Presbytery will provide a pastoral care to the departing pastor and his/her family recognizing the difficult issues the family faces in such a major life transition. In the spirit of love and understanding, guidance will be provided for the pastor and family establishing the fact that further participation in the church may cause serious difficulties within the congregation. Serious discussion needs to take place with regard to the benefits for both the pastor and the congregation if the family seeks another church home in which to participate. The adult children of a retiring/resigning pastor may have their own identity in the congregation and compelling reasons to remain with that congregation. In such cases, those family members are encouraged to exercise restraint in discussing the current pastor's performance or the current work of the church.
10. In the case where a pastor retires/resigns but the spouse continues to work within the community for a limited period of time to finish out a contract, the pastor may negotiate with the COM about the use of the manse or other concerns that need to be discussed to make the transition run smoothly during that time.

Policy for Pastors and Churches Concluding a Pastoral Relationship

SIGNATURE PAGE

TRINITY PRESBYTERY

For the Minister:

I have read Trinity Presbytery's Policy for Pastors and Churches Following the Conclusion of a Pastoral Relationship. I understand these policies and agree to abide by them.

Teaching Elder

Date

For the Session:

We have read and discussed Trinity Presbytery's Policy for Pastors and Churches Following the Conclusion of a Pastoral Relationship. We understand these policies and agree to abide by them. We also agree to share those policies with our congregation.

Clerk of Session

Date

For the Committee on Ministry:

I/We have shared Trinity Presbytery's Policy for Pastors and Churches Following the Conclusion of a Pastoral Relationship with the pastor and session of _____ Church. The signing of this acknowledgment will be reported to the Committee on Ministry and recorded in the Committee's minutes.

COM Member(s)

Date

This signed document is to be kept on file by the COM and serves as documentation that the policy of Trinity Presbytery's COM has been followed and understood.