

**Policy for the Relationship of Departing Pastors
And their Former Congregations
Adopted by MUP August 21, 2018
Revised: February 26, 2022
Commission on Ministry – MUP**

The Commission on Ministry (COM) has pastoral responsibility for all the pastor members of the Presbytery. That responsibility needs to be exercised with special care during periods of transition for the pastor members. The COM must show discretion in assisting the completion of the ministry in such a way that encourages health and wholeness for everyone.

In the hope of loving one another as Christ loves us, the COM offers the following policy to assist pastors in leaving a congregation in a healthy and constructive manner. Our hope is to move the people forward in the ministry so that they can enjoy the invigoration of all past service and anticipate fresh gifts from new servants of God.

POLICY

Congregational Education. Prior to departure, the pastor should clearly and consistently state that she or he should not exercise any pastoral roles at the pastorate's conclusion. This helps church members understand that it is not a personal matter when the former pastor declines to participate in a baptism, wedding, funeral, or to make a pastoral call. The COM will assist the pastor in educating the congregation both before and after the pastor's departure

Friendships with Church Members. The natural development of a special kind of friendship between a pastor and a church member can enrich the lives of all concerned. However, problems inevitably arise when the naturally close bonds between the pastor and a few members of a church result in the pastor being viewed as caring more for his or her "favorites." This is further exacerbated when the pastoral relationship is dissolved. It is unlikely that the same people who understand themselves as being exceptionally close with the current pastor will ever feel quite the same way with the next. It is therefore recommended that the pastor be intentionally encouraged to seek close personal friendships with people outside of the congregation instead of friendships within one's congregation.

The reason: The role of the pastor is a professional relationship similar to the physician and patient relationship. Lasting personal friendships are completely mutual. The pastoral relationship, by its nature is neither lasting nor mutual in the same manner as friendship. It is a relationship defined primarily by the Office of Ministry that a pastor holds. It is therefore a relationship that involves a power differential. Upholding the office precludes the same kind of absolute mutuality that a real friendship demands.

Every individual relationship between a pastor and a former member absolutely, inevitably *must* change once the pastoral relationship is dissolved in order for the congregation as a whole to remain a healthy part of Christ's Church. Pastors therefore should be vigilant in establishing boundaries between those who are church members and those with whom they have hopes of establishing long-lasting mutually-gratifying, egalitarian friendships, since a pastor's relationship with a church member is destined to change drastically at the end of her or his tenure.

Leaving it to the presbytery or the next pastor to establish those boundaries is a threat to the peace and unity of the church that the pastor vowed to uphold in his or her ordination vows. The pastor should

therefore discuss these boundaries at even greater length with congregants with whom the pastor has felt especially close. In addition, the pastor should be prepared for those relationships to suffer after his or her pastoral relationship has been dissolved and should be preparing his or her congregants for that reality. Simply put, the overall health of the church takes precedence over a pastor's personally gratifying friendships with members. Even agreeing to listen to assessments about the church or the new pastor (interim installed or otherwise) can adversely affect the relationship between that new pastor and the congregation; such conversation should therefore be actively avoided and soundly discouraged by the departing pastor.

In accordance with the Book of Order G-2.0905 a former pastor can *Officiate by Invitation Only: After the dissolution of the pastoral relationship, former pastors and associate pastors shall not provide their pastoral services to members of their former congregations without the invitation of the moderator of session.* Without the invitation of the current pastor, it is important for the departing pastor to refrain from performing baptisms, funerals, weddings, and other services for friends. What this means is that the former pastor's response to any invitation by a former member to participate in anything in the church, in any capacity whatsoever, should be an emphatic "No."

Further, this response should be made without laying any blame for it on either the PC(USA) generally, or on the new pastor, specifically. A pastor's continuing involvement in the life of his or her former congregation can only cause significant delay in the healthy development of the relationship between the new pastor and his or her former congregation. There are, of course, exceptions. But those should be left to the new pastor and the session to decide. The only time a former pastor should ever take part in any aspect of the life of his or her former congregation is if he or she is asked by the new pastor/moderator to participate because the new pastor/moderator understands that the overall health of the congregation is at stake.

Church Governance. A departing pastor shall not influence, directly or indirectly, the selection of her or his successor. A former pastor shall not communicate with church members about issues affecting the governance of the church or the performance of a new pastor. The situation can become difficult when members of the former pastor's family serve on Session. As a result, the COM recommends that the spouse/partner of the former pastor not be involved in the governance of the departing pastor's church until the newly called pastor has been on site for at least a full year of ministry.

Social Media. Departing pastors should be careful in their use of social media contact with former church members. It is recommended the departing pastor conduct their use of social media with professional guidelines kept in mind and to be careful what he/she shares. It is important to not continue a pastoral relationship via social media.

Continued Involvement in the Church. In some cases, a departing pastor may retire to the community where he or she has served for an extended period. If the departing pastor wishes to continue to worship in a church following the dissolution of the pastoral relationship, then COM instructs the departing pastor to observe the following policy:

- a. The departing pastor should not be present – in worship for one year after a new pastor is called, unless invited to worship by the new pastor. In time of extended interims or in special circumstances the departing pastor should seek the counsel of the COM before attending worship.
- b. Following the initial year, the departing pastor may seek to formally define the relationship the departing pastor will have with the congregation.

- c. If the new pastor deems that the time is still not right, the former pastor should respect this and initiate further conversation at some designated date in the future.
- d. The departing pastor should not serve in a leadership role in the church services or services for the church members (see paragraph 4 on page 2 of this document)
- e. The departing pastor should not be involved in the governance of the church. (see paragraph 4 on page 2 of this document)
- f. The departing pastor should neither expect nor seek the title of "Pastor Emeritus."

Over-involvement in the Church. Should the departing pastor become involved in the leadership, governance, or work of the church so that the peace and unity of the church is being disrupted, the pastor and/or clerk of session should contact the COM for assistance in reestablishing the peace and unity of the church.

Exit Interview. This policy will be discussed in the exit interview conducted by COM with the departing pastor. During the exit interview, the departing pastor will be encouraged to write a letter to funeral homes, nursing homes, and the congregation explaining that he/she will no longer be conducting funerals, weddings, baptisms, etc.

The signatures below indicate this policy has been discussed in an exit interview conducted by COM with the departing pastor.

Departing Pastor's signature

COM representative's signature

Date