

**RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MINISTERS AND
CONGREGATIONS FORMERLY SERVED
A Resource Paper for Congregational Leaders**

In the church we frequently talk about the relationship between pastor and people as one of “family” and, especially when pastoral relationships are long, affection runs deep between a congregation and the pastor who has been with them during times of crisis and of joy. It can be difficult for church members to understand that the relationship must change significantly when a pastor leaves his or her position, and that they must share their faith journey with another pastor whom God has called to fill that role. If the minister’s transition is to retirement, it can be especially difficult for one who has devoted so much of his or her life to this vocation. As retirement is challenging for all working people, it is more so in a profession where work and identity are so closely bound. These realities urge all who are planning toward a farewell—the pastor, the congregation’s leaders, and the presbytery—to be particularly attentive to the challenges of saying goodbye well.

The Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy recognizes that there are potentially difficult situations involving the relationship of a minister to his or her former congregation. The Committee on Ministry provides this guideline as a means of assisting both pastors and congregations to avoid awkward situations, maintain the church’s ethical standards, and encourage new pastoral relationships that will be established.

The ending of a pastoral relationship sometimes is a trying and traumatic experience and it always means change both in the life of the pastor and his or her family, as well as in the life of the congregation.

When a pastor leaves a congregation, there are bonds of affection between the minister and members of the church, which continue to be cherished. While relations of friendship may continue, the pastoral relationship does not.

When a pastor leaves a church, he or she leaves not only a professional relationship, but also an emotional and communal support group. Some folks will have become personal friends - golf buddies, bridge partners, social companions. Beyond that, some will have developed emotional ties...good old pastor J married us and baptized our children. Pastor J conducted Dad’s funeral (and we want [expect] him or her to conduct Mother’s funeral). When a new pastor moves onto the field, he or she expects to find a new community of people with whom she or he can work, build new relationships, and find friends.

The problem that evolves has to do with leaving what is past and allowing a congregation to move into its future. Both congregations and individuals have a sense of hope for future under the leadership of a new pastor – but that is often coupled with a degree of sadness and nostalgia at the departure of a well-loved pastor.

A PASTORAL REFLECTION ON THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSITION

When a meaningful pastoral relationship ends, there is many times the impulse both on the part of departing pastor and congregation, to “not let go”. While usually motivated by positive thoughts and feelings, trying to ‘hang on’ to a pastoral relationship that has officially ended can be very damaging to a congregation:

- The pastoral relationship is based on clear boundaries and mutual trust. When a departing pastor continues to be involved in pastoral duties without the invitation of the incoming pastor, suddenly there is a question in people’s minds: “Is the ‘official’ pastor the ‘real’ pastor?” “Perhaps we will listen to the ‘official’ pastor preach but if we need weddings or funerals or counseling or input on the direction of the church, we will quietly go to the ‘real’ pastor, the one we’ve known.” This undermines the trust that is so essential in a healthy pastoral relationship.
- Jesus once told his disciples when they were afraid of him leaving: “It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the [Holy Spirit] will not come to you...(John 16:7) The beginning of a new pastorate represents the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of a congregation. It is a time for a congregation to let go of a previous chapter of their life in order to follow the guidance of the Spirit into a new chapter. The greatest gift an outgoing pastor can give to the congregation is to make room for the work of the Holy Spirit by his or her absence. When an outgoing pastor continues--casually or intentionally--to give input on the direction of the church, this encourages the congregation to remain “stuck”—and undermines not only the leadership of the new pastor but the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church.
- When an outgoing pastor, uninvited by new pastor and session, continues to exert influence of whatever kind in the life of a congregation, the membership will begin to ‘take sides’, some with the ‘old’ pastor, others with the ‘new’ pastor. The result is increasing divisiveness in a transitional time when unity is so important. In the worst cases, this can lead to church splits and/or the premature departure of a new pastor, leaving a legacy of guilt and hostility for the congregation’s future.

The support given by an outgoing pastor to a new pastoral relationship can be a true gift to a congregation, as difficult as it may be at first. The inappropriate involvement of a departed pastor in the life of a congregation, however, can cause great pain, divisiveness and damage.

A DENOMINATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The General Assembly (1998) adopted a Professional Code of Ethics which contains the paper, “*Life Together in the Community of Faith: Standards of Ethical Conduct for Ordained Officers of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*.” It contains three rubrics, one of which is “I will conduct my ministry so that nothing need be hidden from a governing

body or colleagues in ministry. Among the 17 commitments made in submitting to such accountability are these points relating to relationships:

“I will:

- Accept the discipline of the church and the appropriate guidance of those to whom I am accountable for my ministry.
- Deal honorably with the record of my predecessor and upon leaving a ministry or office speak and act in ways that support the ministry of my successor.
- Participate in the life of a ministry setting I left or from which I have retired only as directed by presbytery.
- Provide pastoral services for a congregation I previously served only as directed by the presbytery, and provide pastoral services to members of another congregation only with the consent of their pastors.
- Consult with the Committee on Ministry in the presbytery of my residence regarding my involvement in any ministry setting during my retirement.

The congregation’s leaders—both the minister and the members of the session - bear responsibility to inform and interpret to the congregation of the professional boundaries that pastors strive to honor as the pastoral relationship concludes. It is important that the departing pastor make it clear that the relationship of pastor to people will come to an end. This does not mean that friendships must come to an end. Friendships are priceless and are to be preserved, but there is a special responsibility on the part of the departing pastor to prevent friendships from becoming confused with the pastoral relationship.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

These guidelines are important whenever a pastoral relationship concludes, but are particularly critical when a pastor retires.

1. Affirming the value of absence, a pastor without a call to another congregation should seek to find a new church home whenever possible. In communities where the congregation served is the only Presbyterian church, pastors and their families should seek other places to worship during the congregation’s time of transition to new leadership.

2. If relating to another church is impossible, a former pastor should limit his or her activity and seek to redefine his or her role in that particular church.

3. A former pastor should firmly, but in a positive and caring way, tell the congregation that he or she will not participate in a leadership role in any activity or special services in the church. *

4. A former pastor and family continuing to live in the community will have many personal ties. It is appropriate and necessary that those relationships continue. It is incumbent upon that former pastor and family to refrain zealously from discussing the church, changes that are taking place, and other items of church life. This obligation is especially important to guard in informal settings common to conversations among friends.

5. The *Book of Order* allows for the former pastor to participate in weddings, funerals and baptisms after the date of dissolution only by invitation of the moderator of session. A departing pastor should have as his or her first concern the impact this participation would have on the quality of the relationship between the current or future pastor and the life and ministry of the congregation.

6. Any desire on the part of members of the congregation for the departing pastor to participate in congregational life or services should be discussed not with the departing pastor, but with the interim pastor or subsequent installed pastor.

7. Normally, invitations to the departing pastor to be part of the worshiping or fellowship life of the congregation should not occur until the installed pastor has had an opportunity to establish relationships with the congregation.

8. With the guidance of the COM, the Session needs to be firm in declaring to the people that former pastors may not participate in a leadership role in the church. With the guidance of the COM, the Session needs to set the guidelines for the departing pastor and assist him or her in interpreting them to the congregation and to the community.

9. Ordinarily, requests from sessions to grant a former pastor the status of Pastor Emeritus will not be considered by COM at the point of retirement.

10. The Committee on Ministry welcomes and encourages consultation with former pastors or with sessions should questions or concerns arise.

- Sample letters are included at the end of this resource paper.

PROTOCOLS GUIDING VOLUNTARY DISSOLUTION OF RELATIONSHIP

Consultation with the presbytery: When a pastor anticipates resigning a position, he or she should contact the presbytery staff (the Executive Presbyter or Associate Executive for Leadership in Ministry) and the Moderator of COM. Such contact allows the presbytery to be supportive to the pastor as decisions are reached and made public. Ordinarily a member of the Committee on Ministry or of the presbytery staff will be present when the pastor shares the news with the session. At that point information can be shared concerning the process of dissolution of pastoral relationship and the process for securing leadership during the transition time.

A good goodbye: It is an act of faithfulness to the pastoral relationship and to one's own integrity to attend well and intentionally to the tasks of closure in relationship. The Alban Institute has contributed to this conversation by characterizing these tasks as taking control, getting affairs in order, letting go of old grudges, saying thank you, and communicating well the reasons for leaving. More specifically, these tasks include developing and implementing an action plan and a timetable for closure, getting files and records in order and removing personal items, seeking reconciliation of unresolved conflicts, expressing gratitude and offering blessing, and interpreting the reasons for leaving in a constructive manner. Seek consultation with a trusted colleague or a member of the presbytery staff as might be helpful in reflecting on and planning for your own process of saying goodbye to your congregation.

Further explanation can be found in Beginning Ministry Together: The Alban Handbook for Clergy Transitions, by Oswald and Heath; n.b. CTI "Surviving a Farewell".

PROVISIONS AND PROTOCOLS SPECIFIC TO RETIREMENT

Early consultation: As soon as a pastoral retirement is contemplated, the pastor is asked to consult with representatives of the Committee on Ministry and with the Executive Presbyter. This will enable the presbytery to provide guidance and support for the planning which will need to take place, including advance work with the Board of Pensions. It will also enable the COM liaison to confer with the session to guide the planning necessary for the closure of a pastor's ministry and the preparations for the next stages in the life of the congregation and the pastor. COM requests 6 months of lead time prior to the proposed retirement date for such consultations. The presbytery should be consulted prior to sharing of plans with the session or with members of the congregation.

What retirement means: While the call to ministry is a life-long one and does not cease with retirement, retirement does mean relinquishing all pastoral duties related to the church from which the pastor is retiring or any other church served in the past. An Honorably Retired pastor remains on the active role of the presbytery, and may serve in other ways during retirement, including interim ministry, temporary supply, or pulpit supply. The experience and energy of our retired ministers is welcomed in the ongoing work of the presbytery, particularly on committees and teams of the presbytery.

Marking retirement: Retirement is a special time in the life of the minister and the presbytery of which he or she is a part, and will be celebrated through appropriate liturgy at the stated meeting of the presbytery.

Through the Committee on Ministry the minister who retires will be expected to present to the presbytery a paper (not to exceed two pages, single spaced typed) that responds to these questions:

1. As you conclude this important phase of your ministry and come to the time of retirement, what would you like to say to edify the Church?
2. Recognizing that one's commitment to ministry is life-long, commensurate with one's ordination vows, what do you anticipate will be the shape and form of your ministry in retirement?
3. What will be the relationship between you and congregations formerly served that will enhance the work of your successor?

A SAMPLE LETTER TO THE CONGREGATION FROM THE RETIRING PASTOR

Objectives to be accomplished in a letter from the pastor to the congregation:

- To affirm the value of the pastoral relationship;
- To establish firm boundaries regarding how the pastor and congregation are related in the future;
- To honor the process of the church's polity, enabling the ministry of the successor.

(A reference to or a paragraph from the pastor's spouse may also be appropriate in this letter).

My Dear Friends,

As our official relationship as Pastor and Congregation draws to a close, I want to share with you my hope. In the past ten years that I have been your Pastor we have shared many special moments. There have been those special good times ...the babies...weddings...picnics and other fun activities. There have also been those times of sharing sorrow, with hospital and nursing home visits and funerals of loved ones.

My retirement includes handing those pastoral responsibilities on to another because I want to give the new pastor a lot of space to develop his or her own ministry. I remember how I felt when I was the new pastor and how my predecessor gave me the opportunity to develop new, personal ties with the congregation by staying in the background giving me moral support.

So, when you have need of the pastor's service, call the new pastor. If your daughter is getting married, and I'm invited, I'll be rejoicing with you...and I'll offer my help by making our spare bedroom available for some of your out of town guests...or by offering to go to the airport to pick up guests... but the new pastor will be planning the wedding, counseling the kids, and performing the service.

I'll still see you at Rotary Club, continue in the bridge group, and see you at church league softball games and High School football games...but, when we meet...don't ask me what I think about the new pastor or the session's latest project. I'd appreciate knowing that someone is sick, and Suzy is graduating from college with honors and other joys and concerns within the church family, but not other business.

Together, let's continue our concerned relationship, but please help me stay out of church business.

Love,

John

SAMPLE LETTER TO THE CONGREGATION FROM THE SESSION

Objectives to be accomplished in a letter from the Session to the congregation:

- To make a pastoral response affirming the ministry of the pastor;
- To validate the boundaries established and stated for the future relationship of pastor and congregation;
- To relate next steps in the process;
- To affirm the church's leadership in the future.

TO: The Congregation of ----- Presbyterian Church

FROM: The Session

As of May 1st, John Doe will no longer be the Pastor of our church. His ministry here has been well received and many close ties and friendships have been forged. We cherish them and hope they may continue.

The Session of the church is charged with leading the church into new relationships. For a period of time, while the church, through a Pastor Nominating Committee seeks a new pastor for the congregation, an Interim Pastor will serve us. Part of the reason for an Interim Pastor is to provide for the managing of the church's business, worship and spiritual life. It also serves as a kind of a bridge from what has been in the life of our church, to what our ministry in the future will be.

(We're aware of the letter you've received from Pastor John, asking for your help in allowing him really to retire.) We, as your Session, also ask you to help the church move from what has been into our next phase of ministry. Please support us by cherishing what is past while working for today and tomorrow. Please allow our Interim Pastor, and the Installed Pastor, who will follow, to become your pastor. Remember, roles are changing. John will continue to be your friend, but others now must take over the pastoral roles and duties. We hope you will help make this transition a positive experience by supporting the Session during this important time.

Sincerely yours;

For the Session
Jane Jones, Clerk

**SAMPLE LETTER TO THE CONGREGATION & SESSION FROM THE
PRESBYTERY UPON RETIREMENT OF A PASTOR**

TO: The Session & Congregation of ----- Presbyterian Church
FROM: The Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy

We greet you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We share with you the transition that is taking place as your Pastor, John Doe, retires. His ministry among you has been appreciated and admired by the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy.

Many new things will be happening as this transition takes place. Be assured that the Presbytery is here to help and support you. During the period of change, we ask the Session to be diligent in seeing that the retiring pastor is allowed full retirement and relieved of having to respond to congregation members with special needs. At the same time we encourage the Session to provide for continuity and a positive continuing ministry through the use of an Interim Pastor and that the congregation give the Interim Pastor full support by welcoming his or her talents and experience to meet their personal and family pastoral needs.

Through the Committee on Ministry, the Session will be apprized of persons available to serve you in this time as Interim Pastor.

Your Committee on Ministry Liaison will be readily available to offer you particular help and assistance during this time. Your liaison will be ready to answer your questions about the process of seeking a new pastor as you move from Pastor Doe's ministry into the future.

As you ponder your future, your liaison can assist you in claiming the uniqueness of your ministry at ----- Presbyterian Church and begin to consider the pastoral skills needed to help the congregation own its vision and fulfill its own ministry goals.

The Presbytery will be there with a lot of assistance in the search for the pastoral candidate with just the right skills. The presbytery will be there with you as this exciting process takes place. Feel free to contact him at any time with your questions and needs.

Sincerely yours,

_____, Chair, Committee on Ministry

cc: COM liaison