

Covenant of Closure – Ministers Retiring from Service

Policy for the Dissolution of Pastoral Relationships

Commission on Ministry - Presbytery of Chicago

Approved by the Presbytery Assembly on December 11, 2007

Updated and Amended January 6, 2023

“An installed pastoral relationship may be dissolved only by the presbytery.”

- Book of Order, G-2.0901

Preamble

The life of every congregation is punctuated by the coming and going of installed pastors and associate pastors; and the professional life of most ministers is punctuated by several changes in pastoral relationships with congregations. For both the congregation and the minister, it is important for these transitions to take place in as healthy a way as possible. All too often attempts are made to draw a former pastor or associate into disputes or disagreements with an interim pastor or with the next installed pastor. The system (or family) of the congregation often tries to place a former pastor between them and new leadership. Such triangulation only serves to intensify (and sometimes mystify) the conflict. It is important that former ministers do not become involved in any way, if or when problems arise in a former parish.

In retirement some minister members may continue to reside in the community where their last church is located. It is important to clarify, both in advance of the retirement and as circumstances dictate afterward, the changes in relationships that retirement will require.

The policy shall be followed with any minister retiring from an installed pastoral relationship with a congregation; the spirit of this policy shall be followed with any minister retiring from a temporary pastoral relationship with a congregation.

A. Exit Interview

In order to foster healthy pastoral transitions, the Presbytery of Chicago through its Commission on Ministry shall conduct an exit interview with all ministers who desire to dissolve their pastoral relationship with a congregation, in order to accept a new call, or to retire, or for any other reason. This interview shall take place as soon as possible after the Session has taken action to call a Special Congregation Meeting to act on the pastor's request for a dissolution of call. This request for dissolution must be approved by the Congregation as well as Chicago Presbytery, through the Commission on Ministry (*see G-2.0901*).

The content of such an interview shall include, but not be limited to, the following:

1. Appraisal and appreciation for service given to the congregation or agency and the Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly.
2. An appraisal of the congregation's strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for growth.
3. Plans for recognizing the conclusion of the call in the context of worship as well as a farewell celebration.
4. Explanation and clarification of the principles guiding the relationship between the former pastor / associate pastor and the former congregation. These principles have been established to safeguard the vitality of the congregation and to facilitate transitions and the development of a healthy relationship with a new pastor. The guiding principles are:

- a. The retiring former pastor / associate pastor shall not worship on a regular basis with his/her former congregation, and shall abstain from worship with that congregation during the pastoral vacancy or while the congregation is served by an interim pastor.
- b. The former pastor shall not involve himself/herself in any leadership or advisory role (public or private) in the former congregation.
- c. The former pastor shall not intervene, support, or give advice to anyone involved in a congregational disagreement or dispute.
- d. The former pastor shall not officiate in any special events in the lives of parishioners or of the former congregation, including weddings, funerals, baptisms, worship leadership, church anniversary activities, etc., unless expressly invited by the Moderator of the Session.
- e. Any requests for pastoral services from former parishioners must be gently refused, and the former pastor, interim pastor or Moderator the Session should be informed of the request.
- f. It is not expected that friendships with individuals in the former congregation will be terminated. It is expected that former pastors will refrain from giving opinions or directions regarding church business that could undermine the transitions necessary for the church and the development of the relationship between the congregation and a new pastor (or interim pastor).
- g. If a former pastor plans to visit a congregation by attending worship or a special event, the Moderator of that Session should always be consulted.
- h. If the pastor receives a new call in the same presbytery, it can possibly be difficult to abide by these principles. The former pastor must exercise diligence to abide by the covenant of closure which has been signed.

The COM shall also arrange for an exit interview with the Session shortly after the pastor leaves service with the congregation in order to discuss where the congregation has been, where it is today, and ways of looking to the future.

B. A Covenant among the Parties

A covenant of closure is to be signed by the departing minister, the Clerk of Session, and a representative from the Commission on Ministry, noting agreement with the above listed guiding principles. This agreement shall be interpreted to the Session and the congregation, included in the minutes of the congregational meeting when the pastoral relationship is dissolved, published in any church newsletter, and noted in the minutes of the Commission on Ministry.

C. Role of the Commission on Ministry

The Commission on Ministry shall demonstrate support and guidance to the congregation by providing resources during this transition of pastoral leadership. A representative from COM shall attend the congregational meeting where the vote is taken to dissolve the pastoral relationship in order to interpret the process and explain the steps that will follow the pastor's departure.

A representative of COM shall meet with the session after the congregational meeting in which the pastoral relationship is dissolved and prior to the pastor's departure to explain the tasks and steps facing the church during the period between pastors. Interpretive and informational material will be provided to the session for distribution to the congregation.

One of the roles of the Commission on Ministry is to support and guidance to the congregation by providing the resources during this transition of pastoral leadership, including when a pastor retires. The COM works to support and care of the retiring pastor by maintaining contact, offering opportunities for continuing service through the presbytery, encouraging the supportive fellowship with other retired minister members, and informing the retiring pastor of appropriate seminars and agencies that might assist in making a successful transition to retired life.

When a retired pastor remains in the community, the new pastor may ask for the insight and services of the retired pastor. The new pastor shall determine if and when to request the services of the former pastor.

C. The Minister's Family

In the considerations of any minister's retirement, a particular concern arises for the needs of other family members, especially the minister'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. The Presbytery has no direct jurisdiction over the non-clergy members of ministers' families, but the Presbytery urges the spouse, in the context of those relationships, to be supportive of the forming relationship between the congregation and an interim pastor or new called pastor, and to refrain from anything that would undermine this forming relationship. It may be wise for the spouse to consider not worshipping with the former congregation at all during the period of pastoral vacancy, or while an interim pastor is present.

As it is appropriate, the minister's family will be included in retirement planning, discussions, workshops, and seminars.

D. Pastor Emeritus/Emerita

The Commission on Ministry acknowledges 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 pastor will actively encourage former parishioners to develop positive relationships with the new pastor; such encouragement includes gently refusing invitations from former parishioners for pastoral services (such as weddings, baptisms, and funerals). The church in which the retired minister has worked so long and hard to nurture and sustain now needs his/her help to establish a healthy nurturing relationship with its new leader(s). As stipulated in the Book of Order, any invitation for former pastors to participate in service with former parishioners should be at the invitation of the current Moderator of the Session.

Covenant of Closure - Presbytery of Chicago

The Rev. _____,

the _____ Presbyterian Church of _____,
and the Commission on Ministry of the Presbytery of Chicago, having discussed the intent and requirements of the Presbytery's Covenant of Closure / Policy for the Dissolution of Pastoral Relationships, enter into the following covenant:

I, the Rev. _____ agree:

- a. To fully support the future pastoral leadership of this congregation;
- b. To refrain from involvement in any leadership or advisory role (public or private) in the former congregation;
- c. To not to intervene, support, or give advice to anyone involved in a congregational disagreement or dispute;
- d. To gently refuse requests to officiate in any special events in the lives of former parishioners or of the congregation, including weddings, funerals, baptisms, worship leadership, church anniversary activities, etc. unless expressly invited by the Moderator of the Session;
- e. To gently refuse requests for pastoral care services made by members of the congregation;
- f. To consult with the Moderator of Session prior to visiting the congregation, attending worship, or attending a special event;
- g. To refrain from giving opinions or directions regarding church business;
- h. To explain and affirm the above principles to the congregation in writing (by letter or newsletter or email), and/or from the pulpit before departing.

It is understood that this policy does not affect or require termination of friendships with individuals in the former congregation.

The Session of the _____ Presbyterian Church agrees:

- a. To respect the terms of the Covenant agreed upon by their former pastor or associate pastor as outlined above;
- b. To interpret the terms of the Covenant to the congregation and to incorporate this agreement in the minutes of the congregational meeting when the pastoral relationship is dissolved;
- c. To incorporate this agreement in the Minutes of a Session Meeting.

Signature, Pastor

Signature, Clerk of Session

Signature, COM Representative

Date