

Former Pastor Policy and Covenant of Closure **National Capital Presbytery - Committee on Ministry**

Approved by the Congregational Transition Commission, 1/5/17

and COM Coordinating Commission, 1/17/17

Approved by COM Coordinating Commission 11/2018

Introduction

The life of every congregation is marked by the coming and going of pastors; and the professional life of most pastors is highlighted by several changes in positions. That these transitions take place in a healthy and edifying way is important to all involved. To that end, the nature of the relationship between a congregation and a pastor who has previously served them is of concern to the Presbytery. This relationship must be well defined to promote the health of the congregation and the ministry of their current pastor.

Each pastor must be afforded every opportunity to build and nourish a vital pastoral relationship with their new community. Ongoing relationships with previous pastors can negatively impact the current pastoral bond. This policy seeks to shape and monitor relationships of congregations with their former pastors to avoid negative impact.

A Covenant Among the Parties

1. **A Covenant of Closure** will be created between a pastor and the congregation when the pastor's call is dissolved or the contract governing their service ends. This covenant will be in place for all pastors who have served a congregation in excess of six months regardless of the position they held. This covenant does not apply to those who serve as parish associates.

2. The Pastor

In signing the covenant of closure, the Pastor affirms they will not:

- a. worship with the former congregation without an invitation of the current pastor/moderator of the session and specific permission of the chair of the COM or designee;
- b. be involved in any leadership or advisory role, public or private, including teaching, in the former congregation;
- c. intervene, support or give advice to anyone involved in a disagreement or dispute or give opinions regarding church business at the former congregation;
- d. provide pastoral care to members of the former congregation;
- e. officiate in any special events in the lives of parishioners or of the congregation, including weddings, funerals, baptisms, worship leadership regardless of location.
- f. participate directly in church anniversaries or reunions, unless expressly invited by the moderator of the session and with the specific permission of the chair of the Committee on Ministry or designee.

3. The Congregation

In signing the covenant of closure, the Clerk of Session affirms (on behalf of the congregation) earnest effort will be made to permit the former pastor to be a *former pastor*.

- a. The members of the congregation will be made aware of the Covenant and the reasons it is put in place. This shall be communicated to the members by the Session in both written and verbal form.
- b. A representative of COM shall be invited by the departing pastor and/or the Session to visit the Session and the congregation during the process of the pastor's departure.
- c. The departing pastor shall help explain and affirm this policy to the congregation and ask the congregants to understand the importance of respecting their new relationship.
- d. The signed covenant (see appendix) will be made available for review by the members of the congregation by the Clerk of Session.
- e. The session shall remind the congregants of the covenant within the month following the pastor's departure. This communication may be provided verbally, in writing, or electronically.

4. Other Considerations

- a. Outstanding loans and equity sharing arrangements are to be settled in accordance with the loan or equity sharing agreement. Such loans are part of the terms of call of the pastor, and any forgiveness of such loans, unless provided for in the loan documentation, constitutes a change in call that must be approved by the congregation and the presbytery. The COM will be consulted prior to negotiating any such agreement.
- b. The pastor shall make plans for the appropriate disposition of pastoral counseling notes, personal records, etc.
- c. The pastor shall review all electronic accounts and make changes as needed to abide by the spirit of this policy. For example, this may include exiting internal communication lists or groups with members of the congregation and deleting any groups or lists created that set aside congregational members in news or update streams. Other steps will also be required depending on the situation.
- d. The pastor is also responsible for establishing and maintaining new boundaries concerning all use of social networking.
- e. The session shall include the Covenant of Closure in its minutes

5. The Way Forward

- a. The incoming pastor shall determine the relationship with the former pastor. The newly arrived pastor is at liberty to seek insight and services of the former pastor. The new pastor shall determine if and when to request the services of the former pastor. Overall, regular involvement of the former pastor in the life of the congregation should be avoided to promote the health of the new relationship.
- b. When appropriate and in the best interests of the congregation, the pastor may invite former pastors to participate in the life of the congregation. Ordinarily this will be for a specific occasion and not on a recurring basis. Prior to issuing an invitation, the pastor shall consult with the Chair of the Committee on Ministry or designee and receive specific permission.
- c. After a period of time of not less than three years from the time a pastor departs the congregation, the current pastor may, with the advice and permission of the Chair of the Committee on Ministry or designee, invite a former pastor to participate in the life of the congregation on a regular basis. This invitation may be revoked on the initiative of the current pastor and will not extend beyond the tenure of the current pastor. These provisions apply to all former pastors including those in Emeritus status.

6. Issues in not abiding by the Covenant of Closure

- a. The current pastor of the congregation or members of session may contact the Committee on Ministry in the event they do not believe the covenant of closure is being upheld. The Committee on Ministry will hear the concerns and respond as appropriate.
- b. If the covenant is not upheld, the former pastor will be contacted by a member of the Committee on Ministry. This contact will be supportive in nature and seek to ensure the covenant is maintained.
- c. If further instances of covenant disrespect occur, the former pastor will receive a written notice from the Committee on Ministry and shall be referred for appropriate counseling by the General Presbyter.
- d. Continued abridgements of the covenant may lead to formal disciplinary charges being filed which may result in censure or other alternatives listed in D-12.0100.

7. Pastor Emerita

As mentioned above, a pastor emeritus is to abide by the covenant of closure. A pastor cannot be designated emeritus until eighteen months following their departure from the congregation. After the status is granted, the Committee on Ministry may be petitioned by the Session to grant an exception to the three-year norm of regular involvement by a former pastor.

The petition will only be approved if the current pastor supports the request and with the understanding the permission may be revoked if the spirit of the covenant of closure is not upheld.

8. The Former Pastor's Family

The disposition of a pastor's family is not within the scope of oversight of the Presbytery. Even though a pastor may leave a congregation, the family may retain close relations and even continue to attend. Under this policy, family members are encouraged to consider detaching from the congregation. If they remain they are encouraged to ensure they are fully supportive of the new pastor even as they desired the congregation to support their spouse, parent, or child in the past. On rare occasions, a member of the Committee on Ministry may be asked by the current pastor or moderator of the Session to speak with family members of a former pastor when done for the health of the congregation.

**A Covenant of Closure Between
The Reverend _____ and
_____ Presbyterian Church**

In recognition of the dissolution of the pastoral relationship between the Rev. _____ and _____ Presbyterian Church, this covenant of closure is formed.

This covenant acknowledges that Pastor. _____ is no longer our pastor and that his/her pastoral care will no longer be provided to members of this congregation.

This covenant acknowledges that the members of this congregation will not seek out Pastor _____ for pastoral care.

This covenant acknowledges that Pastor _____ rejoices in the congregation she/he has pastored and now makes the transition to no longer be their pastor but to be their faithful supporter in prayer and supplication.

This covenant does not require that the pastor cast aside friendships with individuals in the congregation. The pastor is simply no longer the pastor of the congregation.

The covenant is established in recognition that the congregation must transcend the needs of any pastor or the discomfoting circumstances of a particular pastoral transition. The congregation must form a pastoral relationship with the next shepherd called by God to watch over them. Their new pastor must be accepted and supported for the good of the community.

The burden of responsibility for ensuring a healthy transition lies primarily with the professional behavior of the pastor who is departing. This transition demands empathy and maturity from all parties—the former pastor, the new pastor, the session, and the members of the congregation.

All affirm this covenant establishes the new relationship between the congregation and the pastor. The policy does not expire with the passage of time but remains in effect in spirit even if the pastor is permitted to renew regular ties with the congregation.

We affirm this covenant of closure representing the cessation of our pastoral relationship. We give thanks to God for our time as pastor and congregation and now affirm our trust in the provisions of our Lord for our respective but separate futures.

Pastor Signature

Date

Signature of the Clerk on behalf of the congregation

Date

Representative of the Committee on Ministry

Date