

# **MINISTERIAL GUIDELINES for LEAVING A CONGREGATION**

Flint River Presbytery (adopted by COM on June 27, 2017)

## **GENERAL TIMELINE for WHEN A PASTOR LEAVES**

*When a pastor is in the process of very seriously considering another call, it is helpful to be in touch with the Executive Presbyter to ensure a smooth transition and clear timeframe of expectations.*

- When in communication with the Executive Presbyter, you will together establish the following:
  - anticipated end date at current congregation
  - Session meeting date where EP *and* a member of COM will conduct an exit interview
- The pastor shall immediately receive the “Ministerial Guidelines for Leaving a Congregation” packet which will include this brief timeline as well as the sign-off form for both the Session and the departing pastor.
- COM shall appoint a representative to attend the exit interview with the EP and the Session so that these documents around “separation ethics” can be shared with intention and care. (Generally speaking, the EP will conduct the pastoral exit interview alone to ensure absolute candor by the departing pastor around sensitive issues.)
- A date for the congregational meeting shall be set to dissolve the pastoral call, with a specific, effective date set.
- The COM representative shall ensure that the pastor’s last day of service is communicated in a timely fashion to the COM so that the call can be effectively dissolved by the presbytery.
- Final goodbyes are offered with grace and care.

## **For Ministers of Word and Sacrament and Commissioned Lay Pastors/ CREs**

The following guidelines are intended to assist pastors and congregations as they find themselves in times of transition in pastoral relationships. They are provided as a resource, especially following a long and devoted pastoral relationship. The Committee on Ministry is always available to counsel pastors, their families, sessions, and congregations regarding these guidelines as necessary in their particular circumstances. If you have questions, please contact the Moderator of the Committee on Ministry and/or our presbytery staff.

## WHAT is the RESPONSIBILITY of the SESSION when a PASTOR DEPARTS?

While it is initially and primarily the responsibility of the pastor to inform the congregation of these guidelines, it is highly recommended that the Session affirm to the congregation the separation policy required in the Book of Order (see G-2.0905) and outlined herein by the Committee on Ministry. *The Session can explain in a positive and loving manner that these policies are set in place to assure the long-term health of their congregation.* Intentional communication will prevent any misunderstanding and potential difficulties between a former pastor and/or a successor, which would serve only to distract us from the crucial mission of reflecting God's love to the world.

The session can communicate clearly to the congregation this policy which requires former pastors refrain from participating and officiating at any sacraments, weddings, funerals, or other functions involving members of their former congregations *unless they have been invited by the current moderator of the Session.*

It is especially important to affirm and support these separation ethics when the former pastor lives in or nearby your community.

## FOR PASTORS

### WHEN SHOULD I ANNOUNCE MY RESIGNATION?

Under normal circumstances, four to six weeks' notice is adequate. This will allow sufficient time for tying up loose ends and for saying good-by. Giving notice of more than six weeks can make for an inordinately long period, not unlike a prolonged period between a death and a funeral or memorial service. On the other hand, too short a time between the announcement and the departure is unfair to all affected, *but especially to the congregation.* The time after a pastor has announced her or his intention to move is a period requiring incredible pastoral sensitivity and care is crucial as emotions of grief, loss and even betrayal surface. Pastoral care extended by the departing pastor to the congregation and visa versa will need to be particularly attentive and compassionate.

A minister anticipating a move would benefit from reading the Alban Institute monograph, *Running through the Thistles* by Roy Oswald. Another good resource is *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors*, by Edward White, also published by the Alban Institute.

### WHOM SHALL I TELL, WHEN, AND IN WHAT ORDER?

- a. You shall promptly notify the Executive Presbyter, the Stated Clerk, and the Moderator of the Committee on Ministry of your intention to resign so that they can walk you through the departure process.
- b. Share the news with your Session before sharing it with others in the church or community. The Session must keep this information wholly confidential.
- c. Announce your resignation officially and personally at a public worship service. **Be positive and affirming in your announcement. Share gratitude now. Do not use this time to sow discord or voice complaints.**

- d. Ask the session to call a Congregational Meeting to concur with your resignation. This request to the session regarding the Congregational Meeting can occur when the COM representative and presbytery staff attend your Session meeting as part of the exit interview process.
- e. The *Book of Order* requires that you notify the Committee on Ministry and the presbytery of your resignation and the congregational action concurring with your request (G-2.0902).
- f. You must receive concurrence from the Committee on Ministry, *who is charged with acting on behalf of our presbytery*, before moving from the field. (See lines 371-373 on page 14 in our COM Manual).
- g. It is your responsibility to make certain that your current congregation understands that you will no longer serve in a pastoral capacity. Please make it very clear to your current congregation that you are no longer available to preach or perform any pastoral tasks for them after the official date of departure from the call, *unless invited by the moderator of the Session*. Please note that you shall refrain from social media exchanges *of a pastoral nature* to prepare the congregation for a new pastoral relationship
- h. Furthermore, it is understood (and even assumed!) that you will encourage the congregation to work closely with our presbytery during a search for a new pastor. As soon as possible, the Committee on Ministry will appoint one of its members to serve as a liaison during the transition time as well as designate another minister as moderator of the Session. Whenever possible, the Sunday after the pastor's final Sunday in the pulpit, the Executive Presbytery will be present to preach, meet with the Session and review the ethics of departure.
- i. If there is a manse, you will ensure that all manse property is left in good condition, with all dirt, rubbish, etc., removed.
- j. You will also ensure that all files and records of the church will be put in order and left intact so that the successor pastor may easily find necessary equipment, information, and records. Work with the Session and/or remaining staff so that transfer of information and records is accomplished with everyone's awareness and understanding.
- k. When you leave a congregation, you shall affirm the good that has been accomplished by God's tender grace and providential care.

### **GUIDELINES for RELATING to a FORMER CONGREGATION from a DIFFERENT LOCATION**

- a. Even though former pastors and their families may continue to have friendships in the congregation, former pastors shall not perform weddings, conduct funerals, or counsel members of the congregation unless invited to do so by the current moderator of Session (G-2.0905). *It is important for the former pastor to understand that the current moderator of Session is the one who shall determine whether to request the services of the former pastor.*
- b. Former pastors shall not put the current pastor, current moderator of Session, or Session members in the position of making such decisions around pastoral care. If an installed pastor believes that a former pastor's friendship with one or more congregation members consistently crosses over the boundary of friendship into interference with daily ministry, the current pastor is responsible for initiating a conversation with the former pastor which does not put the involved congregation member in the middle. It is the responsibility of the former pastor to respond with

immediate grace and take appropriate action to end all interference (real and/or perceived) without *demeaning the current pastor*.

- c. Should the interference continue, the current pastor may take the matter to COM, which will determine what limitations need to be imposed upon the former pastor.
- d. Former pastors shall not meet with nor attempt to influence the Pastor Nominating Committee.
- e. The former pastor shall make every effort to be supportive of successors. Anyone who might contact former leaders with concerns about their successors shall be directed to address all such concerns to their new pastor directly or to the Committee on Ministry. Former pastors shall not involve themselves either directly or indirectly when problems arise. The former pastor shall not volunteer or promise to officiate or participate in any official congregational events unless he/she has been invited by the current moderator of Session.
- f. If and/or when a former pastor returns to the area for a visit or vacation, the former pastor shall contact the current pastor for a friendly connection prior to arriving. Such a contact opens the door for mutual support and trust and makes it clear that the former pastor is not trying to slip in and out of town unnoticed.

**GUIDELINES for PASTORS and FAMILIES who REMAIN in the AREA**  
**After LEAVING a PASTORATE**

- a. Former pastors who choose to remain in or return to the area in which he/she has served as pastor need to deal realistically with their own spiritual needs for fellowship and church life *apart from the former congregation*. All pastors are encouraged to nurture relationships outside of their congregations, so that they will not be dependent upon former parishioners for friendships.
- b. Former pastors can either be the most helpful connection to their successors and families in gaining acceptance in their new position or the most difficult problem their successors and families face. Be sensitive to new colleagues, encourage them, help them any way you can, even if it means physically withdrawing from the congregation for a period of time. The determination of an acceptable time for a former pastor to return to a congregation is a decision to be made with his or her successor *before* returning to the congregation. Once returned, it is the option of any current pastor to decide that a former pastor's presence is unhelpful and thus, undesirable. It is then incumbent on the former pastor to seek an alternative place of worship if the current pastor so desires.
- c. Former pastors shall not be involved in any leadership or advisory role (public or private) in their former congregation.
- d. Former pastors shall not intervene, support, or give advice to anyone involved in a congregational disagreement or dispute.
- e. Former pastors shall refrain from pastoral functions, and shall not attend meetings of the Session, Deacons, or Trustees unless invited by the current moderator of Session, along with the concurrence of the Committee on Ministry during the time the congregation is without an Installed, Designated, Interim, Temporary, or Stated Supply Pastor or Lay Pastor commissioned to that congregation.

- f. Former pastors shall not officiate at any sacraments, weddings, funerals, or other functions involving members of their former congregations, or within their properties, unless invited by the current moderator of Session (G-2.0905). The former pastor shall not volunteer or promise to officiate or participate in any events unless (s)he has first consulted with the current moderator of Session. Former pastors shall not put the Pastor, Moderator of Session, or Session members in the position of making such decisions.
- g. Former pastors shall avoid any functions or requests which will isolate or exclude their successors from the people God has called them to serve. Spouses and families of former pastors also need to demonstrate their support of the new pastor in the manner suggested for former pastors.
- h. Former pastors shall avoid formal or informal participation in or comment on the work of the Pastor Nominating Committee.
- i. Former pastors and their families are strongly encouraged to seek alternate worship sites and opportunities. This will enable them to return occasionally as friends and help avoid the inevitable comparisons which often cause pain and problems whenever old relationships are severed and new relationships are being formed.
- j. Former pastors shall state clearly in their final worship service that their relationship with the congregation will now be different. Former pastors need to remind their congregation that they were given the wonderful opportunity to know the congregation through baptisms, weddings, and funeral services, and that their new pastor needs to have the same opportunities.

### **GUIDELINES FOR RETIRING PASTORS**

The Board of Pension suggests that the process of retiring begin six to nine months before the anticipated date of retirement; therefore, six months' notice to the congregation would be appropriate. Ministers anticipating retirement should request the booklet, *Information for Members Planning to Retire*, from the Board of Pensions.

Up to five years before retirement, pastors should send a request for a pension quote to the Board of Pensions, as well as a request for Social Security benefits quote to the local Social Security office.

Presbytery must certify retirement to the Board of Pensions, taking such action at one of the stated meetings. Prior to the Presbytery action, the Committee on Ministry will consider the application for retirement. Be sure enough time is allowed to assure the application can be acted on in a timely manner. **The Board of Pensions suggests requesting a retirement application at least ninety days prior to retirement, but a longer time may be wiser.** Also, if one of the joint survivor options is elected, the appropriate form must be submitted to the Board at least three months prior to the retirement date. Six to nine months before the anticipated retirement date, the pastor should contact the local Social Security office to begin the application process for benefits.

PRESBYTERY OF FLINT RIVER

Sign-off Form for Departing Pastor and Session

*The Presbytery of Flint River adopted this revised Separation Ethics Policy, which specifies standards of conduct for departing ministers of Word and Sacrament on June 27, 2017.*

For Minister of Word and Sacrament

Or Commissioned Lay Pastor/CRE

I have received a copy, have read it, and understand it, and acknowledge that these Separation Ethics as adopted by the Presbytery of Flint River apply to me.

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Signature

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Date

For the Session

We have received a copy, have read it, and understand it, and acknowledge that these Separation Ethics, as adopted by the Presbytery of Flint River, apply to our departing pastor(s).

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Signature- Clerk of Session

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Date

*\*\*It is recommended that the Session post a summary of this information and/or share in a manner most appropriate to congregational context, so that members are fully informed about this policy. \*\**