**Guidelines for the Relationship of Departing Pastors And their Former Congregations**

**And Covenant of Closure**

**Committee on Ministry – Indian Nations Presbytery**

**January 2021**

The Committee on Ministry (COM) has pastoral responsibility for all the continuing members/pastors of the Presbytery. That responsibility shall be exercised with special care during periods of transition in pastoral relationships.

In the hope of loving one another as Christ loves us, the COM offers the following guidelines 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.

**GUIDELINES**

1. **Congregational Education.**

Prior to departure, the pastor shall clearly and consistently state that she or he shall 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.

1. **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, every individual relationship between a pastor and a former member changes 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 shall 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.

As an issue of personal integrity, the pastoral challenge to the pastor leaving a church is to project not only an acceptance of the guidelines and procedures of the Presbytery, but also endorsement of it. 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 shall therefore discuss these boundaries at even greater length with congregants with whom the pastor has felt especially close. In addition, the pastor shall be prepared for those relationships to suffer after his or her pastoral relationship has been dissolved and shall be preparing his or her congregants for that reality.

**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 shall therefore be actively avoided and soundly discouraged by the departing pastor.

1. **Pastoral Boundaries**

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, shall be an emphatic “No.” While avoiding participation in any funerals, weddings, baptisms, etc., of former parishioners is difficult, it shall be remembered that if the first invitation is accepted, reasons to refuse other requests will be very difficult to substantiate.

Further, this response shall 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. Exceptions shall be determined by the new pastor/moderator and session.

1. **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 family of the newly called pastor has been on site for at least a full year of ministry.

1. **Social Media.**

Departing pastors shall 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. It is wise for a departing pastor to report to the congregation before the departure that he/she will "unfriend" and "unfollow" all members of the congregation at departure and will not accept friend requests from members of the congregation for at least one year after departure. Following that year, it is best to not initiate contact via social media with any former congregation members and to firmly redirect any and all attempts to seek pastoral care.

1. **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 directs the departing pastor to observe the following guidelines:

* 1. The departing pastor shall not be present in worship and in other church activities for a minimum of one year after the end of their call.
  2. If the new pastor deems that the time is still not right, the former pastor shall respect this.
  3. The departing pastor shall 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)
  4. The departing pastor shall not be involved in the governance of the church. (see paragraph 4 on page 2 of this document)
  5. The departing pastor shall neither expect nor seek the title of “Pastor Emeritus/Emerita”
  6. 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 COM, 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.

1. **Published statement**.

It shall be the practice of the COM to require the following statement be published in the newsletter and/or bulletin when the pastor announces his/her plan to retire or move a copy of which should be sent to the COM:

*“When a pastor resigns from a pastorate, retires from service, or becomes Pastor Emerita/us, that minister shall no longer perform pastoral functions such as weddings, baptisms, funerals, hospital visitation, or counseling. Active or inactive church members shall not request a former pastor to perform pastoral duties. If requested, the pastor shall tactfully decline. On occasion, the pastor or moderator may, with the approval of session/council, invite the former pastor to perform such duties.”*

1. **Prior to Exit Interview**.

A COM liaison/representative will discuss these guidelines with the pastor and session/council. At that time the parties involved shall sign the attached ”Covenant of Closure” form. This should be done at least two weeks prior to the pastor leaving.

1. **Role of Spouses/Partners/Family:**

It is recommended that the COM representative meet with the pastor, spouse, and, if appropriate, adult members of the pastor’s family to discuss issues of separation and how they might be considered and implemented.

COM directs the family not to do anything directly or inadvertently which could undermine the transition necessary for the church and the development of the relationship between the congregation and a new pastor or interim pastor.

1. **Pastor Emerita**

When any pastor or associate pastor retires, and the congregation is moved by affection and gratitude to continue an association in an honorary relationship, it may seek to elect him or her as pastor or associate pastor emeritus or emerita. The session shall consult with the COM concerning the wisdom of this relationship for the peace of the church. After consultation with the COM, the congregation at a regularly called congregational meeting may elect him or her as pastor or associate pastor emeritus, or emerita, with or without honorarium, but with no pastoral authority or duty. This action shall be subject to the approval of the presbytery, and may take effect upon the formal dissolution of the pastoral or associate pastoral relationship or anytime thereafter.

**Covenant of Closure**

The signatures below indicate these guidelines and procedures have been discussed by COM with the departing pastor and the session or council.

For the Pastor:

I have read and understood the Guidelines for the Relationship of Departing Pastors And their Former Congregations: Covenant of Closure. I understand these guidelines and procedures and agree to abide by them.

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|  |  |
| **Name** | **Date** |

For the Session/Council:

We have read the Guidelines for the Relationship of Departing Pastors And their Former Congregations: Covenant of Closure. We understand these guidelines and procedures and agree to abide by them.

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| **Name** | **Date** |

For the Committee on Ministry:

I/We have shared the Guidelines for the Relationship of Departing Pastors And their Former Congregations: Covenant of Closure with the pastor and session/ council of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. The signing of this acknowledgement will be reported to the Committee on Ministry and recorded in the COM minutes.

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| **COM Representative(s)** | **Date** |