



Guidelines for Graceful Exit 2021

Whenever a teaching elder leaves or retires from a call in a congregation or from a call to a validated ministry, God is in the mix. God's purposes are for shalom – for wholeness, for health, for graceful transitions and for hope and health for the future.

The Presbytery of Cincinnati does not believe that a policy can cover every situation. A list of mandates quickly becomes top-down regulation imposed without regard to what would make for shalom. Therefore, every situation is negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

The responsibility of all parties is to have the necessary conversations in order to adopt a covenant for future relationships and healthy boundaries that honor God and one another.

The goal is health and wholeness for all parties. The Commission on Ministry is the shepherd for transitions. COM guides the conversations, and is responsible to ensure a clear covenant is adopted by the teaching elder leaving service and the session or other organization. This covenant will be renewed when a new teaching elder begins service, and as necessary thereafter. For the sake of simplicity, this document will use the language of "pastor" and "congregation." These guidelines pertain to all calls included in the oversight of the Commission on Ministry, including congregations, validated ministry positions, and those serving in the councils of the PC(USA), including the Presbytery of Cincinnati.

Questions for conversation include: What is healthy for the congregation? What is healthy for the pastors now serving? What is healthy for the teaching elder who is retiring or leaving? What is healthy for the family of that teaching elder? What is healthy for new pastors called to service?

There are a number of topics for conversation in order to develop the Covenant for Graceful Transitions, Future Relationships and Healthy Boundaries. COM will meet with the teaching elder leaving service to talk about her or his perceptions. COM will then meet with the session, without the teaching elder, to bring forward their perceptions. COM will then meet with the teaching elder and session representatives together to produce the covenant which all will sign.

In situations where the teaching elder who has left service has remained in the area, the departing pastor should be asked strongly to sign the Presbytery Covenant of Closure. This document, once signed, should be shared with Session and the congregation so that all parties understand the agreements. The COM will bring the former teaching elder and new teaching elder/s together when the new pastoral relationship begins, and broker conversations thereafter as necessary.

Components:

1. Relationship between the pastor and the congregation
2. Relationship between the pastor and individuals in the congregation
3. Procedures for handling requests for pastoral services such as weddings and funerals
4. Procedures for deciding whether the previous pastor attends congregational events
5. Social Media agreements
6. Relationship between the family of the pastor and the congregation and members
7. Agreement for how to handle introduction of a new pastor with the previous pastor
8. Agreement for process to handle boundary issues that might arise

The Covenant for Graceful Transitions, Future Relationships and Healthy Boundaries is a behavioral agreement that is crafted to include all of the above components. All provisions need to be written down in sufficient detail. All parties need to understand, be able to explain, and confirm agreement with all provisions of this covenant.

For a covenant that includes forms of continuing connection, there must be the ability on all sides to talk honestly about appropriate boundaries, and the willingness and ability to engage in continuing feedback and evaluation on how things are going. COM is a partner in monitoring the transitions during the time for temporary pastoral leadership and again upon the arrival of the next pastor.

There may be times when a professional counselor/coach/consultant is engaged to help the session and the pastors have an honest and rigorous conversation about the boundary issues inherent in these relationships.

A covenant that is adopted when the pastoral relationship is dissolved will be re-negotiated when a new pastor is installed or appointed.

Every situation is different. In general, there are two models for Graceful Transitions, Future Relationships and Healthy Boundaries. A template for each is provided below.

MODEL 1: GRACEFUL TRANSITION WITH A CLEAN AND COMPLETE BREAK

Components (as covered under the Covenant of Closure):

1. The congregation is informed of the retirement or termination date of the pastor.
2. The congregation is informed that when the teaching elder leaves service, he or she will not be involved in any further ministry with church members.
3. Any requests for participation in funerals, weddings, hospital/emergency visitation, and other pastoral care situations should be gracefully declined by all parties on the basis that the pastor is now retired or engaged in other life pursuits. The reasons for declining should not be “because” of the new pastor.
4. All parties – previous pastor, current pastors, leaders of the church and the church office – rigorously avoid any phrases such as “We wish Pastor Susie could do the funeral, but the rules won’t let her do so.”
5. Exceptions to requests for service are to be made by people designated by the session. It is critical is to avoid placing the current pastor in a position where she or he either gives or denies permission for requested service by the previous pastor. When it is up to the current pastor to

decide if a previous pastor can participate, then the current pastor is left with the unfortunate choice of either approving or appear controlling and insecure.

6. In consultation with the COM, the Session may decide to review this policy at some point in the future. This date will usually be at least 3 years from the termination date. Any return of the pastor to the life of the church should be negotiated based upon the health of the congregation, not upon whether or not the newly installed pastor is “self-confident and non-threatened.”
7. In some circumstances, the pastor will refrain from contact in any form, including social media and social friendships, with previous parishioners. An alternate is that the pastor leaving service will not “un-friend” previous parishioners, but will never comment upon the congregation in his or her posts, or in responding to the posts of others. In the same manner, social friendships will be conducted with the previous pastor refusing to engage in conversation about the current ministry and pastors of the congregation.

MODEL 2: GRACEFUL TRANSITION WITH DEFINED BOUNDARIES

Components:

1. The congregation is informed of the retirement or termination date of the pastor.
2. The congregation is informed that that after that date the pastor will not be involved in any further regular ministry with church members.
3. As a norm, any requests for participation in funerals, weddings, hospital/emergency visitation, and other pastoral care situations should be gracefully declined on the basis that the pastor is now retired or engaged in other life pursuits.
4. The session decides if there are any times where normatively the services of the previous pastor might be requested. The particular area where such requests might come and be appropriate is in end of life care and funerals for persons with whom the previous pastor had a significant pastoral relationship. These situations should be talked about and an agreement for method of engagement be established prior to the end of the pastoral relationship.
5. If the current pastor or session are contacted to request the services of a previous pastor, the pastor or session representative will decline based upon the need to let the previous pastor be retired or engaged in other life pursuits. The exception would be any agreements that have been adopted as specified in point 4.
6. Exceptions to requests for service are to be made by people designated by the session. It is critical is to avoid placing the current pastor in a position where she or he either gives or denies permission for requested service by the previous pastor. When it is up to the current pastor to decide if a previous pastor can participate, then the current pastor is left with the unfortunate choice of either approving or appear controlling and insecure.
7. In consultation with COM, the Session may decide to review this policy at some point in the future. This date will usually be at least 3 years from the termination date. Any return of the pastor to the life of the church should be negotiated based upon the health of the congregation, not upon whether or not the newly installed pastor is self-confident and non-threatened.
8. If social media contacts continue (i.e. being friends on Facebook), the previous pastor will refrain from commenting upon the ministry of the previous congregation. Liking a post on some event is permissible.
9. If personal friendships continue, either face to face or over social media, with members of the congregation, the previous pastor will refrain from comment upon the current ministry and operations of the church, and upon anyone engaged in the ministry of the church.

10. Any provisions for the spouse or children of the previous pastor to continue in the life of the congregation should be clearly stated, adopted by the session, and explained to the congregation.
11. An agreement should be reached upon how the previous pastor will handle attendance at funerals, weddings, and other special occasions in the life of the congregation.

When all parties are clear on each of these components – or the components appropriate to other ministry situations – the Covenant for Graceful Transitions, Future Relationships and Healthy Boundaries should be drafted and circulated to the pastor leaving service, the session and the COM.

After all parties have approved the draft, the Covenant for Graceful Transitions, Future Relationships and Healthy Boundaries should be signed by the pastor leaving service, the clerk of session, and a COM representative. Plans for communicating the provisions of covenant to the congregation should be developed. The communication plan normally involves a letter to the congregation and verbal explanations during worship or a meeting of the congregation.