



PRESBYTERY OF
NORTHEAST
NEW JERSEY

“Saying Goodbye” Presbytery Policies and Resources for when a Pastor Leaves a Church

COM Policy adopted July 7, 2022

Saying Goodbye

The departure of a pastor is an extended exercise in intentionally saying Goodbye. In the pages below we will list the various ways that “Goodbye” may be extended to various groups in the church in hopes that the church will be strengthened and prepared to both appreciate and grieve what has been so that it may be freed to look forward to what will be, to be able to embrace new pastoral leadership.

The pastoral relationship is very important, often deeply personal, and, in some cases, lifesaving to people in a congregation. This relationship develops through study, teaching, preaching, administering the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, weddings, funerals, presence in crises, and praying with and for members of the congregation. With the leadership of a congregation and particularly with the elders, the pastor works to encourage the people in the worship and service of God, equipping them for their tasks within the church and their mission in the world. In all these dimensions of the pastoral relationship there are elements of trust, confidence, admiration, affection, fondness, caring, and love.

The ending of the pastoral relationship is often a trying and traumatic experience for both the pastor and the members of a congregation. It always means change for the life of the pastor involved and the congregation. Therefore, in the light of our Book of Order and the best of our traditions, the following guidelines represent what the departing pastor and the congregation will want to do as they face the situation of pastor and congregation saying “Goodbye.”¹

¹ This policy is oriented toward the majority of pastoral departures, which might be characterized as ‘fond farewells’. But it must be acknowledged that some are closer to ‘bad breakups’, where a pastor departs during a season of conflict. COM and the church leadership will need to consider alternate language and procedures in such cases.

Starting the Goodbye – Informing the Session, Congregation and Staff

At some point, a pastor who has decided to leave a congregation must notify the church. How soon should this be before the pastor's last day? Certainly not less than four weeks and probably not more than eight.² There has to be enough time for goodbyes but not so much time that things become strained with the waiting. An impending departure often has the effect of pausing any new congregational initiatives as all the congregational attention turns toward the departure.

The pastor will state their intention to depart at either a called or regular session meeting. It is advisable to have a COM liaison present for this meeting to answer questions and assure the session of the support of the presbytery in the upcoming transition. It is wise to have communication for the larger congregation already prepared to be sent (either in hardcopy or electronic form). The pastor should notify staff either right before or right after this session meeting. The general goal is to have everyone in the church be notified more or less simultaneously so that no one feels disrespected or left out.

The pastor and session should agree on a date for the Pastor's last Sunday and a date when their employment will be ended.³ It is appropriate to plan a Liturgy of Farewell during the final worship service with the congregation. It is customary plan one or more farewell events to express gratitude to the departing/retiring pastor and to celebrate the ministry they have shared together. It is important for both members and pastors that venues for expressions of gratitude and affection be offered.

Practical Steps to be Taken During the Goodbye

The Session should review the types of work the pastor has been doing for the church and make plans for how those responsibilities will be handled after the departure. The session should utilize their COM liaisons as a resource.

1. How will the session secure preachers and people to administer the sacraments?
2. How will pastoral care needs be handled? How much can the congregation (or its Deacons) handle? Who could the congregation call on when a professional is needed? Who will officiate at weddings and funerals? [Not the departing pastor—see the Covenant of Closure.]
3. (The presbytery will appoint a person to moderate meetings of the session.)
4. Has the pastor been involved in any critical issues related to the church building? Some pastors do nothing in this realm. Others wind up being the person who knows how to start the furnace, work the security system or set up the Zoom meetings. These responsibilities need to be transferred to someone else. The pastor should relinquish information about online accounts and passwords. The congregation should then change those passwords.⁴

² Some pastors who are retiring may choose to give longer notice.

³ For an installed pastor, the departure cannot occur until the presbytery (usually through its COM) approves the dissolution of the pastoral relationship. This is nearly always a routine formality and need not be worried over.

⁴ For pastors who have used a church account for email, storing files, and editing documents, the church can maintain such accounts for a period of time.

5. Some churches rent space to other organizations. Has the pastor been the point person in communicating with tenants? If so, that role needs to be transferred.
6. Has the pastor been the leader in any important mission projects of the congregation? Those responsibilities need to be transferred as well.
7. The pastor should remove all personal belongings from the church building by the end date. All keys to the church shall be returned.
8. Any occupancy of the manse beyond the date of dissolution must be negotiated between the pastor and the session. A retiring/departing pastor may not continue to live in a manse following a termination date without the permission of the congregation and the presbytery.
9. All financial obligations, payments or arrangements between the Presbytery, congregation and/or any congregation members with the pastor and/or family members shall be concluded no later than the effective date of the dissolution.⁵
10. The COM will conduct exit interviews with both pastor and session. At this time the COM will review the terms of the Covenant of Closure with all parties. The session should pass a motion to abide by the terms of the covenant. Pastor, Clerk and a COM representative will sign the covenant.

Clarifying and Tending to Relationships During the Goodbye

The weeks before departure are a critical time in the ministry of the pastor for the church. If a pastoral departure is handled well by both pastor and congregation, a range of emotions will be expressed, relationships will be celebrated, and the church will be free to discern its own future mission and ministry. Critical actions during this time include...

1. Pastoral visits with shut-ins and members who feel especially close to the pastor. Offer private moments of farewell and appreciation.
2. During this period of time, it is vital that the departing pastor make it clear that they love the church, but that part of that love is trusting the church's future to God and to the pastoral leadership God will provide over time. Part of goodbye is letting go and trusting God. Therefore the pastor will not be available for pastoral services in the future. This should be said from the pulpit.

⁵ The pastor is to be compensated for unused vacation time, but not unused continuing education time. Travel/Professional Reimbursement and Continuing Education limits are normally pro-rated for the number of months that have elapsed in the year by the departure date. All vouchered expenses should be turned into the church for reimbursement by the departure date. (If the pastor has accrued unused Continuing Education funds, the church is under no obligation to disburse them but sessions may choose to be generous in this regard if the pastor has a plan for continuing education after departure. Use of such funds should still be vouchered.) See the presbytery's Policy on Compensation.

3. Having conversations with particular friends. Make it clear that the pastoral relationship will come to an end. This does not mean that friendships must come to an end. Friendships are priceless and are to be preserved, but there is a special responsibility on the part of the departing pastor to prevent friendships from becoming confused with the pastoral relationship. The pastoral functions of counseling, calling, conducting weddings, funerals, or baptisms are not appropriate. Neither is the rendering of opinions or judgments about the ministry of the former church or its pastor ⁶. It is the departing pastor's responsibility to see that this really happens.
4. Some churches have made a beautiful ceremony out of the concluding worship service. For example formalizing in worship the turning over of the keys to the church office, taking off the pastoral robe and laying it on a front pew or some other symbolic gesture, thus making public the relinquishing of authority. There is a sample order of worship in the 2018 Book of Common Worship.

The Goodbye and The Pastor's Family

In the considerations of the dissolution of the pastoral relationship, 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 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, not to do anything which would undermine the transition necessary for the church and the development of the relationship between the congregation and a new pastor or interim pastor. Of all the matters above, it is recognized that this subject is perhaps the most difficult to navigate in a healthy and effective manner, and may place a real burden upon family members. It may be helpful to remember one of the great touchstones of our heritage, that is, "truth is in order to goodness," (Book of Order, F-3.0104) and to follow one's conscience and the best intentions of the heart is the best advice of all.

⁶ "My Friend, the Former Pastor" by Joan Mabon, in Saying Goodbye, A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors, an Alban Institute Publication by Edward A. White.

Resources for the Congregation

- After the Bibliography, the next two pages are the “Covenant of Closure” which clarifies the relationship between pastor and church after the Goodbye is complete.
- After that is a single page which might be used as a bulletin insert or otherwise sent to the congregation to help them understand the reason for the boundaries between a congregation and its former pastor.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. “Code of Ethics for Presbyterian Ministers.” A paper whose source is unknown
2. “Pastor and Congregation Face Retirement” by R.J. Kirk. From Special Papers and Research: Reports. The Alban Institute, 4125 Nebraska Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20016.
3. “Report from the Task Force on Ministerial Ethics, Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery.” Adopted by presbytery, February 13, 1990.
4. “Running Through the Thistles.” An Alban Institute publication by Roy M. Oswald.
5. “Saying Goodbye, A Time of Growth for Congregation and Pastors.” An Alban Institute publication by Edward A. White.

The following sections/pages may be of particular interest:

Part V... Liturgical Resources for the Closure of the Pastoral Relationship	pgs 69-76
Part VII...What Are The Ethics of The Relationship After We’ve Said Goodbye?	pgs 94–107
Part VIII...Conclusion: Learning To Live With Risk and Uncertainty	pgs 108–111
Appendix... A check List for a Pastor’s Consideration on Leaving a Congregation	pgs 112-114

6. The Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area, “Separation Ethics: When Pastor and Congregation Say Goodbye” 1993
7. Presbytery Documents from the former NJ presbyteries: Newark, Elizabeth, Palisades and New Brunswick. Worthy of special mention is the Newark document on “Separation Ethics” which formed the skeleton of this document.



PRESBYTERY OF
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The Covenant of Closure Between Pastor, Church and Presbytery

The last day for Pastor _____ at the _____ Presbyterian Church will be on _____. After this time, the pastor⁷ will no longer have pastoral responsibilities at that church. The pastor, session and COM of the Presbytery of Northeast New Jersey enter into the following covenant.

Understanding that the Book of Order (G-2.0905) states:

“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.**”

1. The Pastor agrees:

- a. not to involve him/herself in any leadership or advisory role (public or private) in the life of the congregation; and
- b. not to intervene, support or give advice to anyone involved in a congregational disagreement or dispute; and
- c. not 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; and
- d. to refuse requests for pastoral services made by members of the congregation; and
- e. to consult with Moderator of Session prior to visiting the congregation (including hospital visits), attending worship or attending a special event; and
- f. to 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 the new pastor. This restraint will extend to electronic communications and social media, as well as phone/in-person.

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

⁷ The word, “Pastor” is used throughout this document for ease of reading. However, “pastor” is meant to include Teaching Elders in interim, installed or contractual relationships, and/or Commissioned Pastors (Ruling Elders commissioned to particular service).

2. The Session agrees:

- a. to respect the terms of the Covenant agreed upon by the departing pastor as outlined above; and
- 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; and
- c. to incorporate this agreement into the Session minutes

3. The Presbytery of Northeast New Jersey's Commission on Ministry shall:

- a. Interpret this Covenant of Closure to the session and the congregation.
- b. To note the agreement in the COM minutes

I understand this covenant and agree to abide by it.

Pastor

Date

We, the session of _____ (church name), understand this covenant and agree to abide by it. We also agree to interpret this covenant to our congregation.

Clerk of Session

Date

Representing COM, we have shared this covenant with the pastor and session. We agree to support the church and pastor in this time of transition and be a resource to both.

COM Representative

Date



Explanation of The Covenant of Closure Between Pastor and Church

When a pastor leaves a church, bonds of affection between the pastor and members of the congregation continue to be cherished. Relationships of friendship continue, but the pastoral relationship does not. In order to spare pastors and church members from awkwardness and embarrassment, and to encourage the new pastoral relationship that will be established, and in the case of multiple staff congregations, clearly affirm the pastoral relationship(s) that remain, the Presbytery of Northeast New Jersey directs that the church be reminded of these requirements:

Book of Order, G-2.0905 ***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.”



“But what is the harm in having our previous pastor baptize my child? Or officiate at a wedding or a funeral? I feel so close to that pastor...”

You feel close to your previous pastor because they have been your pastor and have shared important moments of your life. They had the chance to share those moments because they were your pastor. If you do not let your new pastor share such moments, you will never feel close to them. In essence, you will deny them the chance to become your pastor. You are starting a

new relationship with a new pastor and need to extend to them the same graceful acceptance of their ministry that your family gave to your previous pastor years ago.

2,000 years ago, the Apostle Paul dealt with questions like this in the church in the city of Corinth. Paul came first and people loved him. Then Apollos came; some people preferred him. The two groups in the church were quarreling. Paul explained to them that both he and Apollos were simply servants of God!

⁵ What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. ⁹ For we are co-workers in God’s service; you [all of you in the congregation] are God’s field, God’s building. (1 Corinthians 3:5–9)