

*FIRST READING . . . JANUARY 2009*

**GRACIOUS ENDINGS AND PRODUCTIVE BEGINNINGS  
WHEN A PASTOR RETIRES OR LEAVES A CHURCH**

Guidelines, Retirement Agreement, and Ministerial Ethics

(Committee on Ministry Document

Edited by Interim support group of Donegal Presbytery 10/08)

The Committee on Ministry has pastoral responsibility for all the minister members of the Presbytery. That responsibility needs to be exercised with special care during periods of transition for the minister members. One such period of transition is the retirement or leaving of a minister. When that retirement or leaving is from a ministry over which the Presbytery has jurisdiction (such as a pastorate or a Presbytery staff position), then the COM must show discretion in assisting the completion of the ministry in such a way that encourages health and wholeness for everyone.

One of the tensions inherent in ministry is that ministers serve churches, but they give up the privilege of being a member of a local congregation. The pastor's family, however, usually become members of the congregation which the pastor serves. At the point of retirement or leaving from pastoral ministry there is, typically, a sense of loss for the pastor's family. While a minister's family does not lie within the COM's jurisdiction, it does lie within our Christian concern. The COM institutes a policy of pastoral care toward all ministers and their families around the time of leaving and retirement. The retirement of a pastor or his/her call to a new ministry is a time of joy, thanksgiving, stress, and anxiety for the congregation, pastor and her/his family. THE CONGREGATION has built loyalties and deep meaningful relationships with the pastor whether s/he has been there for a long or moderate length of time. THE PASTOR who leaves or retires faces a radical change in her/his life and for the family.

Few anticipate what a radical reorientation of life, of the sense of call and of the sources of self-esteem and fulfillment that change will require. If they stay in the same community there is no rule that says the family must give up its present church membership. Any continuing relationship needs to be extremely judicious and restrained in conversation about the church in any manner, from which the pastor retired or left. A successful return to the former church requires an absence of **three** years and

- 1) full and open discussion and agreement of the new installed pastor regarding the return,
- 2) a self-confident and non-threatened newly in stalled pastor,
- 3) the former pastor must genuinely be willing to switch from being the shepherd to taking her/his place as one of the flock,
- 4) and the judicious and tactful refusal of the former pastor and family to become involved in any discussion of the church's policies or problems.

THE PRESBYTERY and Committee on Ministry should give sufficient and clear guidance and support to the retiring or leaving pastor and family or the session and congregation at this point in their pilgrimage.

After a proper and appropriate farewell, THE SESSION AND CONGREGATION need to definitively close that chapter of its life and move on into the future into which God wants to lead it. The session and presbytery bear responsibility for nurturing the congregation to that end. A key step in this process is the hiring of a qualified Interim Pastor.

THE LEAVING OR RETIRING PASTOR faces one of the biggest challenges of her/his ministry -to help the congregation end its relationship to and dependence upon her/him, and to do nothing that will slow or interfere with the congregation's development of its new direction in the interim period and its loyalty to a new pastor.

THE PASTOR'S FAMILY is a part of the leaving or retirement process. If the leaving or retiring pastor and family stay in the community, then neighboring pastors need to be alerted to the needs of these persons and held accountable for extending them hospitality and support. The retired or leaving pastor and family need the continuing loving pastoral care of the PRESBYTERY. The COM asks minister members to contact the appropriate area chair or the general COM chair when the minister begins to plan for retirement or leaving even if that event is still some years in the future. In every anticipated retirement, the COM shall, through the area chair, offer to that minister the appointment of a respected pastor to counsel and guide the minister through the retirement process, and to continue in a pastoral relationship after retirement as long as both shall deem it helpful. .

In addition to enabling the processes which have been suggested above, the Committee on Ministry should: 1) if the leaving pastor or retiree and family are moving away, alert the new presbytery of membership and particular churches there to the new family's need for welcome and pastoral care; 2) if the leaving or retiree and family are staying in the Presbytery, see that the presbytery makes use of their skills and energy in presbytery committees and activities to the extent that the pastor wishes.

The SESSION is responsible for the spiritual and administrative life of the individual church. As such the session has a very important role in the retirement or leaving of a pastor, the successful transition of the church in the interim period and the calling and installation of the new pastor. It is important that the session lead the congregation in saying "good-bye" appropriately to the retiring pastor and in moving toward the next chapter in pastoral leadership.

The Session will:

- 1) Initially receive the pastor's notice of the intent to retire or leave.
- 2) Notify the Executive Presbyter of the presbytery and arrange for her/him to meet with the church and pastor.
- 3) Call a congregational meeting to dissolve the relationship between the church and the pastor.
- 4) Get from presbytery and the COM copies of this paper which delineates how a leaving or retired pastor is to relate to her/his former congregation.
- 5) Inform the congregation that the retiring pastor, once retired, or the leaving pastor, once left, is not to be involved in any further ministry with church members, e.g. services such as baptism,

weddings, funerals and also other functions including, but not limited to pastoral care. The session will explain to the congregation why this break is necessary. This should be both in the form of a letter to the congregation and through the newsletter and by announcements. On the rare occasion when such participation is desirable, the invitation with session approval, must come through the current pastor.

- 6) Develop a Retirement Agreement with the retiring pastor and have the agreement approved by Session. A copy of this agreement will be included in the minutes of the next session meeting and a copy signed by Clerk of Session sent to COM for its information and records.
- 7) Ensure appropriate celebration gifts are arranged for the retiring or leaving pastor and family.
- 8) The Session may, after the departure of the retiring pastor, consider bestowing the title of "Pastor Emeritus/Emerita" if appropriate. The title is honorific, in appreciation of past service, carrying no ministerial or pastoral authority or rights with the congregation.

### **RETIREMENT OR LEAVING AGREEMENT**

We believe that God called us together as Pastor, Congregation, and Presbytery when the Presbytery of \_\_\_\_\_ installed The Rev. \_\_\_\_\_ as Pastor of \_\_\_\_\_ Church. We believe that God calls to new ministries, including those in retirement, that require the dissolution of pastoral relationships. Thus, it is appropriate that the Congregation of \_\_\_\_\_ dissolves the relationship between Church and The Rev. \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_. We believe that it is God's will that \_\_\_\_\_ Church, and its new pastoral leadership need to be free to move forward in Christ's ministry, able to establish new bonds and experience new ministry and styles.

We believe that the reign of God among us is diminished if the parties above were to give any time to making or listening to uncomplimentary or critical comments or comparisons of pastoral leadership.

Therefore: In order to honor God's call, will, and reign we establish this Agreement to assist each other in observing the following commitments and agreements:

Prior to leaving, the retiring or leaving pastor, together with the Session, will send a letter to the congregation, and have it published in the church newsletter, stating that s/he will be retiring or leaving and thus will no longer be the congregation's pastor. The letter will request that the congregation not ask the retiring or leaving pastor to officiate at any services after the date of effective dissolution. When a pastoral relationship is dissolved, the minister shall a) sign the retirement or leaving agreement with the session and b) announce publicly and in writing that he or she will no longer be the pastor and will not be available for pastoral services. In the case of a retiring pastor or a pastor who has left the church but remains in the physical area of the congregation, s/he should absent oneself from the particular church for a period of at least **3** years.

Any successful return to the particular church requires:

- 1) full and open discussion and agreement of the current pastor regarding the return,
- 2) a self-confident and non-threatened new Pastor,
- 3) a former Pastor who must genuinely be willing to switch from being the shepherd to taking her/his place as one of the flock,
- 4) and the judicious and tactful refusal of the former Pastor and family to become involved in any discussion of the church's policies or problems.

These guidelines are effective for the interim period and appropriate interchange with the interim pastor, as well once a new installed pastor, is equally called for and expected.