

LEAVING GRACEFULLY & RESPONSIBLY:
CARING FOR YOURSELF AND FOR EACH OTHER IN A PASTORAL
TRANSITION

Workshop at SEI Presbytery Meeting on August 23, 2018 led by Stephen Kolderup

From ***On Calling A Pastor:***

When a pastor announces his or her acceptance of another call for service or his or her retirement, the congregation often experiences a variety of emotions: sadness, anger, betrayal, or even relief.

[Ministry opportunity: Dealing openly and honestly with one's own emotions and acknowledging those emotions in others.]

A good ending is the foundation of a good new beginning for the next pastor. It is important that the exit of the pastor is handled well for the benefit of all concerned.

Alban Institute—congregations who had not experienced a good termination process carried unresolved work with them when new pastoral leadership arrived on the scene; and pastors who carry unresolved feelings about leaving their last situation have less energy in the new position.

Some Best Practices That I Learned Years Ago & Eventually Understood

- 1) Timing the announcement—leaving begins with that but continues until actual departure

Congregation members and the pastor need time and opportunity to celebrate their ministry together and say goodbye. It is important that the exit time be neither so short that goodbyes do not get said nor so long that everyone is ready to move on before the actual departure date.

- 2) Writing a good farewell letter

Being straight and clear about the reasons for leaving

- brings relief and assurance if the members understand the excitement or the new opportunity of the next call
- brings out honesty if something has indeed failed in the relationship
- expresses some of the emotions currently experienced

- 3) Working on saying goodbyes—how we say goodbye at a party—denial or honesty; avoidance or embrace; pastors and members have an opportunity to practice gaining closure with significant others.
 - a) People who have been close to us; time to say “thank you” and acknowledge the disappointments and frustrations—looking at the total relationship
 - b) People with whom we have had difficulty; letting go of old grudges; remain open to reconciliation and resolution
- 4) Redefining relationships—letting go of pastoral roles while remaining human; the dangers of continued contact. Some problems with the current wording of the PSEI Covenant of Closure in 1h, because it states that closure does not affect friendships. They are affected and careful boundaries must be put in place for the health of the congregation. Alban Institute has more to say on this.
- 5) Working on unfinished business—remaining conscientious about responsibilities but not committing the congregation to projects beyond your tenure
- 6) Planning an appropriate celebration
 - a) A service of departure and farewell
 - b) Prayers of confession and forgiveness
 - c) A gathering where the congregation presents “This Is Your Life”—celebrating the good and the difficult
 - d) A memory book with photos and letters written by members—and pastors need to read the letters in the first few days after departure
- 7) After the departure
 - a) The ethics of “no longer the pastor” – phone calls, ministry requests, social media
 - b) The ethics of the ongoing congregation – clear communication, a larger perspective than “your friendship”, social media, welcoming the new pastor

Resources for Congregations in Pastoral Transition

On Calling A Pastor; Church Leadership Connection, PC(USA), revised 2015.

Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors; Edward A. White, Editor; The Alban Institute, 1990.

Running Through The Thistles: Terminating a Ministerial Relationship with a Parish; Roy M. Oswald; The Alban Institute, 1978.

COVENANT OF CLOSURE
PRESBYTERY OF Southeastern Illinois

The Rev. _____, the _____ Presbyterian Church, and the Committee on Ministry of the Presbytery of Southeastern Illinois, enter into the following covenant:

- 1. I, the Rev. _____ agrees:**
- a) not to become involved in any leadership or advisory role (public, private or through social media) in the _____ Presbyterian Church congregation and
 - b) not to intervene, support, or give advice to anyone involved in a congregational disagreement or dispute;
 - 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;
 - d) to refuse requests for pastoral services made by members of the congregation;
 - e) to consult with the Moderator of Session and the Presbytery (Presbyter for Congregational Care and/or COM) prior to visiting the congregation, attending worship or attending a special event;
 - f) to refrain from giving opinions or directions regarding church business;
 - g) to explain and affirm the above principles to the congregation in writing (by letter or newsletter)and/or the pulpit before departing.
 - h) It is understood that this policy does not affect or require termination of friendships with individuals in the _____ Presbyterian Church congregation.
- 2. The Session of the _____ Presbyterian Church agrees:**
- a) to respect the terms of the Covenant agreed upon by Rev. _____ 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 in the Session Minutes.

Signature, Pastor

Signature, Clerk of Session

Signature, COM Liaison

Date

Ten Commandments for Welcoming a New Pastor

I. Thou shalt not compare the old Pastor and the new Pastor, for the Lord thy God has made each person unique and wishes you to appreciate each original creation.

II. Thou shalt not expect everything to stay the same when the new Pastor arrives. Nor shalt thou resist change, nor assume that change is bad, but thou shalt trust that the Lord thy God isn't finished with your church yet and is bringing change for your good and the good of your mission.

III. Thou shalt not make graven images of thine old grudges, nor shalt thou keep stale disappointments in the temple of thine heart, but thou shalt forgive and move on in the grace of the Lord thy God, for how can thou ask God for mercy unless thou give mercy from thine heart?

IV. Thou shalt not commit gossip, nor shalt thou fearfully complain, nor shalt thou listen to those who do, but instead thou shalt entreat them to adjust their attitudes and lighten up, for everything shall be alright, and in fact, shall turn out very well indeed – better than you can even imagine.

V. Thou shalt not commit nostalgia or say that the old days were better, for in so doing thou shalt make thy judgment come true. Be assured that the Lord thy God is not falling asleep at the wheel, but will be with thee and surprise thee with abundant blessings, more than thou canst contain or count.

VI. Thou shalt not factionalize nor create “us-them” divisions, but thou shalt unify with thy brothers and sisters even when they annoy or confuse you.

VII. Thou shalt not come to the new pastor with your demands, pressure, complaints, bad reports, manipulations, threats, agendas, unsolicited advice, or snide comments. But thou shalt say, “Welcome! How can we help you? We love you! We would like to increase our giving significantly. We're praying for you and your family. Welcome to our community! We baked you some cookies!” And each week, thou shalt do so again and again until the new pastor begs you to stop.

VIII. Thou shalt increase thy giving, and not withhold thy tithe, but invest thy money and thine heart in the future of thy community of faith and mission.

IX. Thou shalt not come to thine old and former pastor with anything but praise for the new pastor, but thou mayest bring thy concerns to God in humble prayer, and if thou must, thou may also share concerns with the duly appointed leaders of the church.

X. Most important, thou shalt trust God, and stay connected to God, and draw strength from God, staying deeply rooted in the message of God's grace. For God is good, and God will never leave you nor forsake you. You can count on that for sure!