Dissolving the Pastoral Relationship

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

The minister will inform the presbytery and the session and shortly thereafter share the news with the congregation. The session calls a congregational meeting to act on the minister’s request that the relationship be dissolved. The congregational action becomes a recommendation to presbytery, which will vote to dissolve the pastoral relationship. The pastoral relationship between a pastor or associate pastor and a church is dissolved only by presbytery.

Resources for Congregations in Pastoral Transition


*A Change of Pastors … And How It Affects Change in the Congregation.* Loren B. Mead, The Alban Institute, 2005.
Planning for Transition

The transition between pastors is a valuable time for congregations. It is an opportunity to reflect on your congregation, its community context, and its ministry in the present and future. It may also provide the opportunity to experience different styles of pastoral leadership and to work on particular issues facing the congregation. The session, the presbytery, and the PNC (once it is elected) work together to make the transition time constructive. Plan your transition with your ministry context and vision for ministry in mind. Consult with your presbytery and other key leaders to discern how to use the transition period for spiritual renewal, understanding your call to ministry today, reorganizing, and future ministry planning.

Next Steps in Ministry

WHO ARE WE?
WHO IS GOD CALLING US TO BE?
WHERE IS GOD CALLING US TO GO?

Having a good understanding of the above questions will help you decide the type of leadership you will need in your new pastor. The answers to the above questions will also help you communicate your ministry narrative to prospective pastors discerning a call to your congregation. For more information see the video on Mission Studies at http://www.pcusa.org/ocap

As presbyteries work with congregations during their search for a new pastor, the goal is to assist them in making the best match possible. Making a good match begins with having a clear picture of who the congregation is and who God is calling it to become. Presbyteries take a variety of approaches to what is often called a “mission study.” Some presbyteries use a particular approach that all of their congregations must follow. Others make suggestions with regard to several instruments that can be employed for this purpose. Still others recommend that, in most cases, it will be much more beneficial to wait until the new pastor arrives to do an in-depth study so that the new pastor can be a part of that process. In such cases, the presbytery may suggest a much shorter process than the traditional mission study.

Here are some questions that your presbytery committee, working with churches in pastoral searches, might want to ask as it determines what suggestions it might make.

1. How long has it been since the last pastoral search?
2. Have there been significant changes in the size or financial capabilities of the congregation since the last search?
3. Are there significant changes in the community the congregation serves? Are there new immigrants, has there been a gain or loss in population, has there been an economic boom or bust?
4. Does the congregation have the energy level to conduct an in-depth study?
5. Is there a trained interim pastor in place? If so, does this person do a mission study as a routine part of his or her service as an interim/transitional pastor?
6. Has there been significant conflict in the church?
7. Did the last pastorate end precipitously?
There may be other questions that your presbytery’s committee would like to ask to help determine the kind of guidance it will give with regard to a mission study.

Research Services, a ministry of the PC(USA), provides helpful and free online resources to congregations engaging in a mission study. These resources are available at www.pcusa.org/research/help and include:

- **Research Strategies for Congregations.** A compilation of tools that can be used to help you understand the people in your church and community, including information on congregational surveys.
- **Ten-Year Trends in Your Congregation.** Data from your congregation’s annual statistical report for the most recent ten years with graphs and comparisons.
- City Data — [http://www.city-data.com](http://www.city-data.com)

### Assessing Your Finances

A critical step before searching for a new pastor is a financial assessment. The session, in conversation with the presbytery, should determine whether there will be sufficient funds to adequately support the pastor you call.

- It is important to not only to have the resources to call a pastor but to also have the financial resources to carry out ministry through education programs, mission outreach, per capita, presbytery missions, spiritual formation, building upkeep, and other personnel.
- Moving cost should be budgeted into your financial assessment.
- Cost for conducting your pastoral search (interviews, in person visits, and neutral pulpits) should also be included.
Compensation Package

Consider a compensation package that is appropriate for a pastor with the skills and experience you are seeking as well as for the cost of living in your community. A conversation with your presbytery, a review of the current Board of Pensions Clergy Effective Salaries, and a look at similar church positions listed on the online CLC “Opportunity Search” may be helpful in assisting you to make that determination. Most presbyteries have established minimum “effective” compensation guidelines that must be met for pastoral positions within the presbytery. Be sure you know the current presbytery guidelines.

The manse, if you have one, is an important part of the compensation package. On the Effective Salary Form, the value of your manse should be calculated into the Terms of Call. See the Board of Pensions resource at [http://www.pensions.org/AvailableResources/BookletsandPublications/Documents/pln-103.pdf](http://www.pensions.org/AvailableResources/BookletsandPublications/Documents/pln-103.pdf) for a full definition of Effective Salary.

The compensation package should also include a budget for medical, death, disability, and pension coverage for your pastor through the Board of Pensions. Most presbyteries also require that terms of call include continuing education allowances, SECA (social security off-set), and mileage reimbursement as minimum additions to the salary package.

For part-time calls, your obligation for effective salary and other benefits is determined by the number of hours worked and whether the pastor is in an installed call. Consult your presbytery COM (representative) for guidance in understanding your salary requirements.
ELECTING A PASTOR NOMINATING COMMITTEE

In the PC(USA) call process, the congregation gives authority to search for a pastor to a pastor nominating committee (PNC). Once the PNC is elected, the other members of the congregation and the session have no role in determining who will be the next pastor until the PNC is ready to present its nominee to the congregation for a vote.

The presbytery has a responsibility to work with the PNC members, to advise them, and to evaluate the nominee they select to present to the congregation. The presbytery is authorized by our Book of Order to be partners with you in your discernment process.

The presbytery may have recommendations for the session regarding the number of members for a PNC and the process of electing a PNC. Often congregations will use the congregation’s nominating committee to propose a slate of nominees for the PNC. In considering nominees for the PNC, the congregation’s nominating committee should strive for a PNC that is representative of the whole congregation. It should consider church members of integrity who are

- knowledgeable about the church and community and about Presbyterian theology and government;
- spiritual leaders within the congregation and are active in the life and work of the congregation;
- able to make a significant commitment of their time, energy, and very best wisdom;
- willing to accept this as a task of spiritual discernment, not being easily influenced by personal desires or congregational politics, but rather listening for the voice of God;
- able to honor confidentiality.

The congregation must give careful and prayerful attention to the election of persons to serve in this important role.

THE PROCESS FOR ELECTING A PASTOR NOMINATING COMMITTEE (PNC)

Steps:

1. The presbytery authorizes the congregation to elect a PNC.
2. The session recommends the number of persons to serve on the PNC.
3. The nominating committee or another designated committee prepares a slate to be voted on by the congregation at a meeting called by the session.
4. A congregational meeting is held to elect the PNC.
5. The PNC is elected and commissioned for its work.