

A Covenant of Closure:
Guidelines for the Relationship of a Congregation and Former Pastors

We believe that the Holy Spirit is acting when a pastor is called to serve God's people and also that that the Holy Spirit is acting when it is time for that pastor to accept another call, including the call into retirement.

A healthy relationship between a pastor and God's people is often mutually enriching and joyous. While serving a congregation, a pastor is deeply involved in the lives of God's people, and it is appropriate that strong bonds of trust, friendship, commitment and interdependence develop.

However, when the Holy Spirit leads the pastor to a new call or into retirement, those relationships, however strong, must change for the future health of both the congregation and the pastor. For the congregation to move forward, its members need to accept fully the authority and guidance of succeeding pastors, both interim and called, even as they cherish the memory and leadership of the former pastor. For former pastors to live into their new lives of service or retirement, they need to surrender pastoral authority and sever pastoral ties with their former congregations and their people.

The following expectations will help clarify the new relationship between former pastors and congregations:

Congregations and Members:

- Will not reach out to former pastors for professional pastoral care in times of emotional, spiritual, or physical need, but rather exclusively to their current pastor.
- Will not invite or approach former pastors to perform or participate in pastoral acts, such as weddings, funerals, baptisms, home communions, etc., but rather exclusively the current pastor.
- Will not seek the counsel of former pastors (or their family members) on matters relating to the congregation, including its worship life, finance, administration, leadership, or issues. Members should avoid talking with former pastors (and family members) about congregational matters.
- Will not expect former pastors (or their family members) to retain membership in the church, to attend worship, or to participate in activities or events in the life of the congregation.
- Will speak positively of former pastors (and their family members). As Martin Luther explains in the *Small Catechism*, the Eighth Commandment compels us to do so: "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defense, speak well of them and interpret everything they do in the best possible light."
- Will, in continuing personal relationships, regard former pastors as friends only. Although it is proper to address any ordained minister as "pastor," in light of the new relationship members will remember that the former leader is no longer serving as *their* pastor.

Former Pastors:

-Will politely but firmly refuse requests to provide ministerial care to former congregational members, instead referring them to the current pastor. For the health of the congregation and the integrity of the ministry of the current pastor, this rule will be without exception.

-Will politely but firmly refuse all requests to perform or participate in pastoral acts, such as weddings, funerals, baptisms, home communions, etc., instead referring them to the current pastor. (Former pastors will respond to all such requests with an unequivocal “no” and not suggest that members ask the current pastor if it is okay. Such a request puts the current pastor in a very difficult position, creates an unhealthy triangle, and can set a dangerous precedent.)

-Will decline to comment on matters relating to the former congregation, including worship life, finance, administration, interpersonal relationships, conflicts, or politics. Former pastors will counsel their family members similarly to decline. It is wise for former pastors to discourage members even from talking with them about congregational affairs.

-Will move the official membership for themselves and all family members to another congregation. Former pastors and family members will refrain from attending worship or participating in regular events and activities in the life of the congregation.

-Will speak well of the former congregation, its leaders, and its members. As Martin Luther explains in the *Small Catechism*, the Eighth Commandment instructs us to do so: “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray, or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.”

-Will, in continuing personal relationships, regard members of the former congregation as friends only. In light of this new relationship, former pastors may encourage former congregation members to address them by their given name. When they are addressed with the honorific of “Pastor,” ministers may remind, as appropriate, former members that they no longer serve as *their* pastor.

Covenant of Closure

In order to promote a healthy closure to the ministry tenure of our departing pastor and a healthy beginning to the tenure of successor pastors, we the undersigned agree to do our best to abide by the conditions of this covenant. We will encourage others in our congregation and our families to do the same by making this covenant a public and living document.

Signature _____
Congregation Council President

Vice President

Signature _____
Pastor

Date _____