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# NORTHWEST COAST PRESBYTERY

## GUIDELINES FOR DISSOLUTION OF INSTALLED PASTORAL RELATIONSHIPS

### **BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION**

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

The ending of the pastoral relationship and the resulting changes which occur in the life of the congregation can be life giving and growth producing. They can also be stressful and traumatic. Often a mix of both. Therefore, in the light of the *Book of Order* and the best traditions of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the following guidelines represent what most pastors and congregations will want to do as they work through the changes in their respective lives.

Ordinarily and ideally a pastoral relationship between the Pastor and the Congregation will be dissolved amicably and with a tone of celebration (and a measure of grief) as the Pastor moves to a new field or to retirement. Even in such cases, careful adherence to these guidelines and the drafting of a dissolution agreement to cover such matters as ending date, unused vacation, and medical coverage for a bridge period, and resolution of any loans the pastor may have from the congregation, can result in a smooth, conflict-free transition. Although dissolution of the pastoral relationship also may occur following efforts to resolve conflict within a congregation, this document does not include the steps that should be taken to resolve such conflict. See [NWCP's Creating a Dissolution and Severance document](#).

This policy does not apply to the termination of interim or temporary pastoral relationships or to the termination of a designated pastorate at the end of its agreed-upon term.

### **GOVERNING PRINCIPLES**

The relevant governing provisions from the Book of Order are:

*G-2.0901 An installed Pastoral relationship may be dissolved only by the presbytery. Whether the teaching elder, the congregation, or the presbytery initiates proceedings for dissolution of the relationship, there shall always be a meeting of the congregation to consider the matter and to consent, or decline to consent, to dissolution.*

*G-2.0902 A Pastor, Co-Pastor, or Associate Pastor may request the presbytery to dissolve the Pastoral relationship. The pastor must also state her or his intention to the session. The session shall call a congregational meeting to act upon the request and to make recommendations to presbytery. If the congregation does not concur, the presbytery shall hear from the congregation, through its elected*

*commissioners, the reasons why the presbytery should not dissolve the Pastoral relationship. If the congregation fails to appear, or if its reasons for retaining the relationship are judged insufficient, the request may be granted and the Pastoral relationship dissolved.*

*G-2.0903 If any congregation desires the Pastoral relationship to be dissolved, a procedure similar to G-2.0902, above, shall be followed. When a congregation requests the session to call a congregational meeting to dissolve its relationship with its Pastor, the session shall call the meeting and request the presbytery to appoint a moderator for the meeting. If the Pastor does not concur with the request to dissolve the relationship, the presbytery shall hear from him or her the reasons why the presbytery should not dissolve the relationship. If the Pastor fails to appear, or if the reasons for maintaining the relationship are judged insufficient, the relationship may be dissolved.*

*G-2.0904 The presbytery may inquire into reported difficulties in a congregation and may dissolve the Pastoral relationship if, after consultation with the pastor, the session, and the congregation it finds the church's mission under the Word imperatively demands it.*

*G-2.0905 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.*

Several principles of our polity also provide helpful background to understanding and implementing this policy:

1. Every call in the PCUSA is an agreement among the presbytery, the pastor and the congregation. All three parties are involved in every decision regarding the establishment of a Pastoral relationship and the dissolution of a Pastoral relationship.
2. When the Congregation and the Pastor are in agreement, the Commission on Ministry (COM) is empowered to act with the power of the Presbytery in this regard and report the action to the Presbytery, which always has the power to rescind or amend the action of a commission.
3. All conditions for dissolution shall be compatible with the provisions of the *Book of Order*.
4. The dissolution process shall be considered complete only when the Presbytery acts on the dissolution of the call and the terms of the severance agreement, if any. The Presbytery can act following or prior to session or congregational action.

### **REASONS FOR DISSOLUTION**

The need for dissolution of the pastoral relationship comes about for a variety of reasons, and the procedures and the nature of separation and financial arrangements may vary with the reasons for dissolution. The goal in each instance is fairness to all parties in light of the reason(s) for dissolution.

1. Voluntary Dissolution - Voluntary separation may take place after written notice by the pastor to the session, the vote of the congregation, and the vote of the presbytery which acts to dissolve the pastoral relationship. After formally requesting dissolution by contacting the

Stated Clerk & EP of the Presbytery, the pastor should make arrangements to leave the position in a timely manner in consultation with the Commission on Ministry (COM).

2. Negotiated Dissolution – Prior to announcing any terms of dissolution, including the date, either the pastor or the session shall request that COM assist in negotiating a peaceful and appropriate end to a relationship. This may be the result of funding limitations, changing ministry environment, medical disability, performance of ministry and/or pastoral leadership, or any other situation that brings into question the viability of the Pastoral relationship. Refer to the document: *Creating a Dissolution & Severance Agreement*.
3. Dismissal for Cause - The Pastoral relationship may be dissolved as a result of verified misconduct or judicial action following due process, abandonment of the call as determined by the COM, or presbytery determination that “the church’s mission under the Word imperatively demands it.” (G-2.0904) There are no special terms of dissolution other than the fulfillment of the contractual agreement, i.e., salary and benefits paid up to the date the relationship is dissolved, cash equivalent of unused earned vacation, etc.
4. Death in Service - In the event of the death of a pastor, the salary and allowable benefits of that person will be continued by the congregation to the spouse or dependent for up to three (3) months from the date on which the death occurs or until the Board of Pension death and retirement benefits take effect, whichever comes first. Northwest Coast Presbytery Staff can direct surviving dependents to further resources as needed.
5. Renunciation – In the event that the pastor renounces the jurisdiction of the church, per G-2.0509, dissolution is effective immediately. There are no special terms of dissolution other than the fulfillment of the contractual agreement, i.e., salary and benefits paid up to the date the relationship is dissolved, cash equivalent of unused earned vacation, etc. The Session or calling agency shall make no severance payments or monetary gifts to a pastor who renounces jurisdiction. The Session shall work with COM to set terms for departure and settle any outstanding financial and property issues, if such exist (loans, manse, office equipment, etc.).

## **GENERAL STEPS:**

1. The Pastor or Clerk of Session contact the Stated Clerk (SC) and/or Executive Presbyter (EP) of the Presbytery. The SC/EP of the Presbytery will then contact the Commission on Ministry.
2. The Commission on Ministry works with the session and congregation to reach agreement on the dissolution date and plans for the fulfillment of all obligations, taking into account accrued vacation, salary and other contractual agreements. If negotiations are required, a committee designated for this purpose will negotiate a dissolution agreement. See NWCP’s *Creating a Dissolution and Severance* document.
3. The Session or the Presbytery calls a congregational meeting per their own rule for minimum notification requirements and gives notice at regular services of worship prior to the meeting (G-1.0503) of the pending change in the Pastoral relationship and any special terms or conditions.

## Dissolution of Installed Pastoral Relationships

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4. The congregational meeting is held to act on the dissolution of the call and any proposed continuation of salary and benefits.
5. The moderator of the congregational meeting notifies the Commission on Ministry and Presbytery Stated Clerk of the action of the Congregation. Presbytery action is required to complete the dissolution.
6. If the congregation or the pastor does not concur with the dissolution, Presbytery may designate an AC or empower the COM to hear from the congregation and/or pastor, through its elected commissioners, the reasons why the presbytery should not dissolve the pastoral relationship. (G-2.0902; G-2.0903)
7. When the dissolution is approved by the Presbytery (or its commission), the Pastor and the Clerk of Session notify the Board of Pensions of the changes being made.
8. After an appropriate farewell, both pastor and congregation move to the next steps.