

Grace Presbytery Policy on Pastoral Courtesy
Adopted May 22, 1999

The issue of ministers relating inappropriately to former congregations continues to impact certain situations within Grace Presbytery. Frequently, the violations of pastoral courtesy are purely innocent, arising out of response to an immediate need, or out of the naiveté of either the minister or the session of the previously served church, or the person making a request of a former minister. In some cases, it is a combination of these factors. There are other instances where a deep and abiding friendship is the source of the request. Then, there are those who simply cannot “let go.”

This document is addressed to clergy, lay people and sessions. These guidelines are provided to assist ministers who have terminated their relationship with a congregation, or who have begun a pastorate, sessions (and congregations) who have called new ministers and those who have dissolved the previous pastoral relationship (with or without calling a new pastor). It also relates to well-meaning members of congregations who seek to have folk meaningful in their lives participate with them in one or more of life’s rites of passage or significant moments.

The term “minister” refers to ordained teaching elders (Ministers of Word and Sacrament) active, inactive, and retired in all official relationships established either by presbytery or a session with the approval of presbytery, and Commissioned Lay Pastors who, by definition, are in presbytery-approved relationships.

The 210th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) adopted a paper titled, “Life Together in the Community of Faith: Standards of Ethical Conduct for Ordained Officers in the Presbyterian Church (USA).” It says, in part: “I will conduct my ministry so that nothing need be hidden from a governing body or colleagues in ministry. Therefore, I will:

- Participate in the life of a ministry setting I left or from which I have retired only as directed by presbytery;
- Provide pastoral services for a congregation I previously served only as directed by the presbytery
- and provide pastoral services to members of other congregations only with the consent of their pastors;
- Consult with the Committee on Ministry in the presbytery of my residence regarding my involvement in any ministry setting during my retirement.”

The Book of Order also refers to Christian Marriage (W-4.9003) stipulating that: “Christian marriage should be celebrated in the place where the community gathers for worship. As a service of Christian worship, the marriage service is under the direction of the minister and the supervision of the session. Others may be invited to participate as leaders in the service at the discretion of the pastor.”

Regarding funerals, the Book of Order (W-4.10003) in the section, “Services on the Occasion of Death,” says, “The service is under the direction of the pastor. Others may be invited to participate as leaders in the service at the discretion of the pastor.”

The fundamental assumption in both the constitution and the Ethical Standards passed by the 210th General Assembly is simply that upon the termination of any pastoral relationship on a date set either by the session, when appropriate, or by the presbytery, there should not be further contact between the minister or CLP and the congregation where the relationship existed.

Two basic principles are operative:

1. The session (administrative commissions, when appropriate) when duly governing a church, has the exclusive authority over the use of the facilities and must grant permission for any person or group to use said facilities when that person or group is beyond the normal parameters of usage. (BOO G-10-0102o)
2. The pastor of that congregation, whether installed or in some other arrangement, including CLP, is the pastor of the people. That pastor is to provide all pastoral services and care to that congregation unless providentially prohibited, or precluded for some reason (vacation, illness, etc.)

Thus, in light of the fundamental assumption and operative principles, the following shall govern **FOR FORMER MINISTERS**: A former minister shall never return to a former parish to perform any pastoral function (wedding, funeral, memorial service, baptism, or even worship service) without the express prior invitation of both the session and pastor, or solely the session when the church is without pastoral leadership.

The following shall govern **FOR SESSIONS**: No former minister shall be permitted to perform any pastoral services (named above) within the facilities of the church without permission being granted and an invitation being issued upon the concurrent invitation and permission of the pastor of that congregation. In those cases when there is no pastor, the session **MUST** invite and grant permission for any former minister to return and use the church facilities for performing any pastoral function.

The following shall operate **FOR CURRENT PASTORS**: It is the choice of the pastor, along with the session, when appropriate, to invite and grant permission to any former pastor to return to that parish to perform any pastoral function. When a pastor determines any predecessor is performing any pastoral service within the geographical bounds of his or her former parish without the expressed consent of that pastor and session, when appropriate, then the pastor and/or session should inform the Committee on Ministry where the parish is located and, where appropriate, the Committee on Ministry where the former pastor has his or her membership.

The following shall operate **FOR THE COMMITTEE ON MINISTRY**: The Committee on Ministry shall be sensitive to violations of pastoral courtesy, particularly when they occur on a frequent basis by the same person. When such information is brought to the attention of the Committee on Ministry, it shall take appropriate action, beginning with counsel and ending with disciplinary action (for repeated offenses) with its own members. If the flagrant offender is a member of another presbytery, then the Committee on Ministry of that presbytery shall be

informed of the offense(s) and asked to have that minister cease and desist. If the practice continues with or without action of the former minister's presbytery or without his or her complying with that action, the Committee on Ministry may refuse to allow that person to operate within the bounds of Grace Presbytery. Should failure to achieve compliance by the former minister's presbytery or the minister occur, the Committee on Ministry of Grace Presbytery may file a complaint with the governing body having appropriate jurisdiction.

(It should be noted that these guidelines are not as rigid as the Ethical Standards, for they allow a former pastor to return to a parish upon the directive of presbytery.)