

## **Policy for a Covenant of Closure for Former Ministers and their Calling Communities**

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

A healthy relationship between a minister and God's people is often mutually enriching and joyous. While serving a congregation, a minister 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 minister to a new call or into retirement, those relationships, however strong, must change for the future health of both the congregation and the minister. For the congregation to move forward, its members need to accept fully the authority and guidance of succeeding ministers, both interim and called, even as they cherish the memory and leadership of the former minister. For former ministers to live into their new lives of service or retirement, they need to surrender pastoral and ministerial authority and sever pastoral and ministerial ties with their former congregations and their people.

The following expectations will help clarify the new relationship between former ministers, congregations, and the people they formerly served:

### **Congregations and Members:**

-Will not reach out to former ministers for professional care in times of emotional, spiritual, or physical need, but rather will seek such care exclusively from their current minister.

-Will not invite or approach former ministers to perform or participate in pastoral and ministerial acts, such as weddings, funerals, baptisms, home communions, etc., but rather will approach exclusively the current minister.

-Will not seek the counsel of former ministers (or their family members) on matters relating to the congregation, including its worship life, finance, administration, leadership, or other issues. Members will avoid talking with former ministers (and family members) about congregation matters.

-Will not expect former ministers (or their family members) to retain membership in the congregation, to attend worship, or to participate in activities or events in the life of the congregation.

-Will speak positively of former ministers (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 ministers as friends only. Although it is proper to address any ordained minister with an appropriate title (such as Pastor, Deacon, or Sister), in light of the new relationship, members are wise to remember that the former minister no longer serves them or their community.

## **Former Ministers:**

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

-Will politely but firmly refuse all requests to perform or participate in pastoral and ministerial acts, such as weddings, funerals, baptisms, home communions, etc., instead referring them to the current minister. (Former ministers will respond to all such requests with an unequivocal “no” and not suggest that members ask the current minister if it is okay. Such a request puts the current minister 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 ministers will counsel their family members similarly to decline. It is wise for former ministers to discourage members even from talking with them about congregation affairs.

-Will move the official membership for themselves and all family members to another congregation. Former ministers 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 ministers will encourage former congregation members to address them by their given name. When they are addressed with the honorific title of “Pastor, Deacon, or Sister,” ministers will remind, as appropriate, former members that they no longer serve as *their* minister.

## **Covenant of Closure**

In order to promote a healthy closure to the ministry tenure of our departing minister of Word and Sacrament or minister of Word and Service and a healthy beginning to the tenure of successor ministers, 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/Deacon/Deaconess

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Adopted by the Lower Susquehanna Synod Council**

**SC15.11.38.**

**November 14, 2015**

**York, PA**

**Amended by the Lower Susquehanna Synod Council**

**SC23.09.52.**

**September 23, 2023**