



The Presbytery of
DONEGAL

Handbook for Ending Pastoral Relationships

Pastoral Relationships End

Pastors leave congregations for many reasons.

Sometimes God calls them someplace else. Sometimes they retire. Sometimes health reasons may cause a departure. Sometimes the best discernment of the body is that, in the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit, the pastoral call has come to a conclusion, and that this is due to the providence of God, rather than human success or failure.

Sometimes a pastoral call ends precipitously due to misconduct by the pastor. Sometimes conflict ruptures the relationship between the congregation and that pastor, and a departure is negotiated with the help of the Connecting Our Ministry Commission (COM). Sometimes there may be a necessity for a reduction in force (RIF) due to financial circumstances.

Sometimes the pastoral relationship is not an installed pastoral relationship. Temporary pastorates and Interim Pastorates are short term pastorates by design. Covenant Pastor Relationships may be a very long-term relationship, but they are governed by a contract between the pastor and the session, and may end according to the terms of the contract. See *Types of Pastoral Relationships in the Presbytery of Donegal* for more on non-installed Pastoral relationships. This handbook is on the process for ending installed pastoral relationships.

It is normal for there to be a mixture of feelings and thoughts when any pastoral relationship is ending. There may be relief, gratitude, grief, regret, anger and joy. All of these reactions are to be expected. Nevertheless, there are times when the wisest course is to request that the presbytery dissolve the pastoral relationship.

There are as many ways that pastors and sessions first begin to talk about ending the pastoral relationship as there are reasons why it might end. As soon as a conversation about departure is broached, either the pastor, the clerk of session or a designated personnel representative should contact the Connecting Our Ministry Commission or the Executive Presbyter (EP). COM representatives, including the EP when available, will meet with the teaching elder and the session to be apprised of the situation.

See the *Presbytery of Donegal Vacancy Handbook* for specific details on planning for the departure of the pastor and the transitional period. This Handbook for Ending Pastoral Relationships covers the steps to end the pastoral relationship in the various situations which bring about a request for dissolution.

Book of Order Citations

G-2.09 DISSOLUTION OF PASTORAL RELATIONSHIPS

G-2.0901 Congregational Meeting

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 Pastor, Co-Pastor or Associate Pastor Requests

A pastor, co-pastor, or associate pastor may request the presbytery to dissolve the pastoral relationship. The teaching elder 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 the 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 Congregation Requests

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 Presbytery Action

The presbytery may inquire into reported difficulties in a congregation and may dissolve the pastoral relationship if, after consultation with the teaching elder, the session, and the congregation, it finds the church's mission under the Word imperatively demands it.

The Teaching Elder Requests the Pastoral Relationship Be Dissolved in Order to Accept a New Call

When the request comes from the teaching elder to dissolve the pastoral relationship in order to accept a new call or due to another life event, *and* the session concurs, then the session and teaching elder agree to the effective date of dissolution, and determine the disposition of any remaining vacation, study leave, or reimbursable expense allowances.

The session calls a meeting of the congregation for the congregation to vote upon the teaching elder's request. If the congregation concurs, then the *Presbytery of Donegal Termination of Pastoral Service* form is signed by the teaching elder and the clerk of session and submitted to the Connecting Our Ministry Commission for approval on behalf of the presbytery. This form specifies the effective date of dissolution, and all the arrangements that have been negotiated. The dissolution of the pastoral relationship is reported to the presbytery at the next stated gathering.

Although all situations are different, the typical time period to conclude service after the congregation is notified of the departure is between three weeks and three months. The time period may be longer if the pastor has negotiated a delayed start date in order to sell a home or to meet the timing of school periods. All parties (teaching elder, session, congregation, and COM) need to agree to the effective date of dissolution.

It is the responsibility of the teaching elder and the session to make sure the Board of Pensions is notified of the termination of service. The appropriate BoP form must be submitted according to BoP deadlines for changes in service. The Presbytery Business Administrator is available to assist in determining the correct forms.

See the Presbytery of Donegal Vacancy Handbook for information about planning ending celebrations with the teaching elder, the exit interview process and adoption of a Covenant for Future Relationships and Boundaries.

Typical Timelines and Considerations for a Teaching Elder Searching for a New Call

1. When a Teaching Elder is starting to search for a call, the Teaching Elder may wish to seek the counsel of the Executive Presbyter, the Stated Clerk and/or COM. This consultation is confidential, will not be shared with the session unless the pastor does so. The EP and the Stated Clerk will obtain the permission of the pastor before informing COM. Some of the questions for discernment are: Why is the teaching elder thinking of beginning to search? Are there issues in present call to address? Is the present call still a call or is it time to move on?
2. The EP and members of COM are willing to advise and offer edits of Personal Information Forms upon request.

3. When the PIF goes “live” in Church Information Connection, the Stated Clerk attests that there are no ecclesiastical judicial proceedings in process or sustained. Both the Stated Clerk and the EP have access to the list of PIFs that are being circulated by teaching elders in the presbytery.
4. The EP and Stated Clerk schedule a conversation with the Teaching Elder on the content of Presbytery to Presbytery reference checks. The reference check script is built collaboratively where possible.
5. The teaching elder decides when to inform the session that he or she is searching for a new call. In many cases, the session is informed when the teaching elder has been offered a new call, and is preparing to candidate. In some instances, the teaching elder informs the session after accepting the new call. Teaching elders make this decision in order not to compromise the current ministry or raise the anxiety of the congregation.

DOCUMENTS (Available on the Presbytery of Donegal Website or from the Presbytery Office)

- [Termination of Pastoral Service Form](#)
- [Donegal Vacancy Handbook](#)
- [Exit Interview Process](#)
- [Guidelines for Adopting a Covenant for Graceful Transitions, Future Relationships and Healthy Boundaries](#)
- [Board of Pensions Website](#)
- [Presbytery to Presbytery Reference Check Process and Script](#)

The Teaching Elder Requests the Pastoral Relationship Be Dissolved in Order to Retire

Retirement Planning with the Teaching Elder

When a teaching elder begins to make retirement plans, she or he should schedule a confidential meeting with the Executive Presbytery (EP), the Stated Clerk and/or a COM member for advance planning. If the teaching elder has a spouse, the spouse may be included in the conversation if appropriate.

Initial ideas about the date of retirement, when to let the session and the congregation know, residence plans after retirement, financial planning, and post retirement life planning will be discussed. Part of the conversation will be who has a “need to know.” Generally, this is the Executive Presbyter, the Stated Clerk, the Liaison for Retired Members, and the COM Convener.

Steps to Becoming Retired –Detail Planning with the Pastor and the Session

When the session is informed of the retirement plans, the EP and/or COM representatives will meet with the session. Included in this meeting will be:

- Retirement detail planning, including date of the congregational meeting to vote upon the request, the effective date of the dissolution of the pastoral relationship, appointment of session representatives to work with the pastor on the disposition of any remaining vacation, study leave, and reimbursable expenses.

Scheduling the Exit Conversations and Conversations about Adopting a Covenant for Graceful Transitions, Future Relationships and Healthy Boundaries:

- Congregational plans to celebrate the ministry and retirement of the teaching elder. The EP and or a COM representative will be present for the celebration when possible.
- Date and plan for retirement celebration at a meeting of the presbytery.
- Immediate Transition and Future Leadership Planning. What happens right after pastor leaves? What happens in the longer term? See the [Donegal Vacancy Handbook](#) for this process.

Meeting of the Congregation to Vote Upon the Request for Retirement

The session calls a meeting of the congregation is called for the congregation to vote upon the teaching elder’s request to dissolve the pastoral relationship and be placed upon the rolls of the presbytery as an Retired member. If the congregation concurs, then the Presbytery of Donegal **Termination of Pastoral Service** form is signed by the teaching elder and the clerk of session and submitted to the Connecting Our Ministry Commission for approval on behalf of the presbytery. This form specifies the effective date of dissolution, and all the arrangements that have been negotiated. The dissolution of the pastoral relationship is reported to the presbytery at the next stated meeting, often in conjunction of the presbytery’s celebration of the teaching elder’s ministry and honorable retirement.

Although all situations are different, the typical time period to conclude service in order to retire after the congregation is notified of the departure is between two months and one year. Every situation varies. The goal is to allow enough time to celebrate together, and not so much time that the momentum of mission and ministries is bogged down. All parties (teaching elder, session, congregation, and COM) need to agree to the effective date of dissolution.

It is the responsibility of the teaching elder and session to make sure the Board of Pensions is notified of the termination of service and change in status. Several months should be allowed to process the request for retirement with the Board of Pensions, activate Social Security benefits when appropriate, and arrange for medical coverage.

Exit Conversations and Planning Post-Retirement Relationships

Prior to the retirement date, the EP and COM representatives will arrange times with the pastor and session for Exit Conversations -- talking about what there is to celebrate and learn from the pastoral relationship—and to adopt a Covenant for Graceful Transitions, Future Relationships and Healthy Boundaries.

Part of the planning is to determine whether the pastor will be living locally or relocating. If the teaching elder will be moving away, there is a natural physical boundary that helps with a graceful ending to the relationship. In this age of social networks, which connect people across physical distance, there still needs to be careful conversation about future relationships. When the pastor will be remaining in the community or nearby, careful conversations about boundaries are even more crucial.

For retired teaching elders remaining in the area, the SPIRE Group (Senior Presbyterians in Retirement Experiences) offers fellowship and learning opportunities. The COM Liaison for Retired Members will serve as the contact point to access presbytery resources.

When a new pastor is called to the congregation, the Covenant for Graceful Transitions, Future Relationships and Healthy Boundaries will be reviewed by the session to re-affirm or adjust to maintain the best health of the congregation.

COM will sponsor a meeting between the new pastor and the retired pastor, if still in the area. This meeting will share narratives and cover the Covenant for Graceful Transitions, Future Relationships and Healthy Boundaries.

Please see the Presbytery of Donegal Vacancy Handbook for information about planning ending celebrations with the teaching elder, the exit interview process. In addition, see the Guidelines for Adopting a Covenant for Graceful Transitions, Future Relationships and Healthy Boundaries:

DOCUMENTS (Available on the Presbytery of Donegal Website or from the Presbytery Office)

- [Termination of Pastoral Service Form](#)
- [All About SPIRE](#)
- [Exit Interview Process](#)
- [Adopting a Covenant for Graceful Transitions, Future Relationships and Healthy Boundaries](#)
- [Donegal Vacancy Handbook](#)

Process for Dissolution of a Pastoral Call or Reduction in Force (Rif) For Reasons of Financial Difficulty

Adequacy of Pastoral Compensation

It is the policy of Donegal Presbytery that its member churches shall provide equitable compensation of pastors and shall meet or exceed the minimum terms of call adopted by the presbytery. The authority for this is found in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Order. G-1.0503c and G-2.0804 require annual reviews on the adequacy of the terms of call for a pastor. Further, G-2.0805 states that the call extended to a pastor or associate pastor shall be approved by the presbytery and cannot be changed except by action of the congregation, with the concurrence of the pastor/associate pastor, and with the approval of the presbytery.

Therefore, every congregation of the Presbyterian Church (USA) is obligated to review annually with its pastor(s) the adequacy of pastoral compensation. Additionally, by the action of the General Assembly, each Presbytery may set requirements for the review of pastoral terms of call and has the power to enforce such standards. It is the responsibility of the Connecting Our Ministry Commission to oversee the pastoral compensation process.

Financial Difficulty in Congregations Affecting the Pastoral Call

There are times when the situation arises in which the expenses of a congregation exceed current income levels. Because personnel expenses associated with the terms of a call of a pastor are a major expense in the congregational budget, the question may arise whether it would be prudent to reduce the level of pastoral leadership, or to reduce pastoral compensation, or to dissolve the pastoral relationship for financial reasons in order to adopt a new pastoral leadership. These actions are often referred to as “reduction in force,” or “RIF” as the acronym.

An installed pastoral relationship may be dissolved only by the presbytery. (G-2.0901). Any change in the terms of call of an installed pastor must be approved by the presbytery. When a congregation encounters financial challenges that might result in a reduction in level of pastoral leadership or compensation or a request to dissolve the pastoral relationship, the Connecting Our Ministry Commission is a partner in the conversation. COM will schedule a meeting with the Session to explore the financial situation. This conversation should be scheduled at least 8 months ahead of the anticipated necessity for a reduction in force. Preferably the timeline should be at least one year.

The financial health of the congregation is the responsibility of the session to monitor on an ongoing basis, and to be proactive in identifying financial patterns that might lead to a reduction in force. The Connecting Our Ministry Commission is a partner in the ongoing process of monitoring the vitality and health of the congregation. It is the responsibility of sessions to submit the pastoral terms of call for

annual review, and to make sure the COM has a copy of the materials distributed at the annual meeting of the congregation, including the year-end financial report.

The “Discerning Your Congregation’s Future” Process

When a session notifies the Connecting Our Ministry Commission that a reduction in force is being considered, presbytery representatives appointed by COM shall meet with the session to learn about the situation.

The usual first step will be to schedule a process called “Discerning Your Congregation’s Future.” (See the Discerning Your Congregation’s Future Introduction for more information.) As a thumbnail, the process involves assessing the “critical mass” of a congregation, in particular when a congregation appears to be declining. Critical mass involves many factors. Some of them include vitality of missional vision, focus in planning, committed leadership, financial resources, and people resources. The Discerning Your Church’s Future process is led by a Steering Team with leaders from the congregation, the pastor(s), and COM representatives. The process is conducted with the Session and other church officers. The session may invite members of the congregation to participate. The result is a plan that will include an action plan with concrete next steps. The pastoral model for leadership of the congregation is included in the plan.

When an unexpected financial crisis requires that actions to reduce or dissolve the pastoral relationship proceed immediately, then the Discerning Your Congregation’s Future process may be part of transition planning after the immediate crisis is resolved.

Outcomes of this process in the financial area often involve strengthening the stewardship process of the congregation. This may include training to conduct a Consecration Sunday or other stewardship campaign. One way to address a financial shortfall is to increase generous stewardship in service of the Kingdom of God.

Other outcomes may include reducing expenses, for which there are often many options. Part of the responsibility of COM is to continue to encourage generosity in mission even when reducing expenses, which models appropriate stewardship for members.

When part of the issue seems to involve unclear or unmet expectations of the pastor, the session or the congregation, the Discerning Your Congregation’s Future may include ways to address conflict and mutual disappointment. The process may identify opportunities for growth in the health of the congregation’s missional vitality, leadership and relationships.

Developing a Plan to Reduce or Dissolve a Pastoral Call for Financial Reasons

If efforts to increase stewardship and to reduce operational expenses do not address the financial situation, it may be appropriate to evaluate the level of pastoral leadership and compensation.

If the session determines, in consultation with COM and with the concurrence of the pastor, that due to retrenchment in budget or other circumstances, the pastoral call might need to be dissolved, or that the terms of call might need to be reduced, then a plan shall be developed by the session (including the pastor), and approved by COM.

The consequences of reducing the level of the pastoral call, or dissolving the pastoral relationship shall be considered for impact upon the vitality and health of the congregation. If the recommendation is to request that the presbytery dissolve the pastoral relationship, then the session, in consultation with COM, shall adopt a transitional plan for the vacancy period. (See Options for the Vacancy Period after the Departure of the Pastor.) This will include ways to provide for pulpit supply and pastoral care during the severance period. If the recommendation is to reduce the level of the pastoral terms of call, the session shall develop a revised position description that reflects the realistic expected hours of the new terms of call. The new position description must be approved by COM.

One option in planning for dissolution or reduction of the pastoral call is for the pastor to continue in pastoral service, with formal notice given by the vote of the congregation that the pastoral relationship will be dissolved or the terms of call will be reduced on an effective date at least six months in the future.

A second option is to set a more immediate date for the dissolution of the pastoral relationship, followed by a severance period in which compensation and benefits are continued. The presbytery standard for severance agreements includes at least six months of effective salary and continuation of benefits, and often includes a further period of benefits continuation if a new position has not been found. See the Donegal Presbytery Severance Negotiation process for more details.

A third option is to continue in pastoral service for some months of the six-month period, followed by a negotiated severance period in order to look for a new position, i.e. the pastor may serve for three more months, followed by a severance period of at least three months.

Congregational Meetings to Approve the Plan for Dissolution or Reduction of the Call

When the Session, the Pastor and COM Are All in Concurrence

If the pastor, the session, and COM all are in concurrence with the plan adopted by the session, then two meetings of the congregation shall be scheduled, at least two weeks apart.

The agenda for the first meeting will be to explain to the congregation the outcome of the “Discerning Your Congregation’s Future” process, to provide financial information, and to present the session’s recommendation of the plan to dissolve or reduce the pastoral call. The presentation shall include the terms of the Severance Agreement as negotiated by the Severance Team, and approved by the session and COM. There shall be a time for questions and comments from the congregation. This meeting shall be moderated by a representative from the presbytery appointed by the Connecting Our Ministry Commission; the moderator will often be the Executive Presbyter or the Stated Clerk.

The second meeting of the congregation may be called for a date at least two weeks after the first meeting, with at least two Sundays in between the meetings. At this meeting, the congregation may vote upon the plan recommended by the session to reduce the terms of call of the pastor or to request that the presbytery dissolve the pastoral relationship. The vote shall include approval of the Severance Agreement.

If the congregation approves the plan as presented, with which the session (including the pastor) and COM have concurred, then COM will give the final approval to the plan and report the actions to the presbytery.

If the congregation modifies the plan without the concurrence of the pastor, or of the session or of the COM, then the session shall meet with representatives of COM to consider next steps. The session, including the pastor, may decide to concur with the vote of the congregation, and COM may then vote to approve the plan and report the actions to the presbytery. The session may call another meeting of the congregation to continue to consider options.

If the congregation votes to request that the presbytery dissolve the pastoral relationship, and the pastor is not in concurrence, then COM shall place the matter upon the docket of the next stated meeting of the presbytery. Until that meeting, that pastoral relationship continues at the terms last approved by the presbytery.

**Process to Reduce the Pastoral Terms of Call or Dissolve the Pastoral Relationship
When the Congregation, Pastor and Session are Not in Concurrence**

If the session votes to recommend a plan to dissolve or reduce the pastoral call, and the pastor does not concur, or if the congregation follows the process to request the session to call a meeting of the congregation to vote upon whether to request that the presbytery dissolve the pastoral relationship, then two meetings of the congregation shall be scheduled, at least two weeks apart.

The agenda for the first meeting will be to explain to the congregation the outcome of the “Discerning Your Congregation’s Future” process if it has been conducted, to provide financial information, and to

present any session recommendations regarding the pastoral relationship. The pastor shall have the opportunity to address the congregation. There shall be a time for questions and comments from the congregation. This meeting shall be moderated by a representative from the presbytery appointed by the Connecting Our Ministry Commission, and will often be the Executive Presbyter or the Stated Clerk.

The second meeting of the congregation may be called after a period of two weeks, with at least two Sundays in between the meetings. At this meeting, the congregation may vote upon a plan recommended by the session regarding the pastoral relationship. The pastor will have the chance to respond. If the vote is to request that the presbytery dissolve the pastoral relationship, the vote will include approval of the Severance Agreement, if one has been negotiated. If the congregation votes to request that that presbytery dissolve the pastoral relationship, and a Severance Agreement has not been negotiated, then the session shall meet to appoint the Severance Negotiation Team. Another meeting of the congregation shall be scheduled to vote upon the Severance Agreement.

If the vote of the congregation does not meet with the concurrence of the pastor, or of the session, or of the COM, then the matter shall be placed upon the docket for action at the next stated meeting of the presbytery. The pastoral relationship shall continue with the terms last approved by the presbytery until this meeting. Both representatives of the congregation and the pastor may address the presbytery on the reasons why the presbytery should or should not dissolve the relationship, following the process in G-2.0902 and G-2.0903

The Connecting Our Ministry Commission shall advise the presbytery on whether COM concurs with the request of the congregation to dissolve the pastoral relationship. COM will also advise the presbytery on whether a sufficient Severance Agreement has been adopted by the congregation. If one has not, the presbytery may return the matter to the congregation to adopt a sufficient Severance Agreement that meets presbytery standards. The presbytery may not impose a severance plan upon a congregation, but the presbytery may vote not to dissolve the pastoral relationship until a Severance Agreement is adopted.

In rare circumstances, according to G-2.0904, the presbytery may act to dissolve the pastoral relationship without the concurrence of congregation or pastor, if the presbytery finds the church's mission under the Word imperatively demands it.

Process to Address Difficulties in The Congregation and The Pastoral Call

Things Fall Apart

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold
--*The Second Coming, William Butler Yeats*

Our story as the people of God begins in a garden. God intends beauty, relationship, and fruitfulness in all of life. Instead, sin enters, and things fall apart.

Every human being, every relationship, every plan, every institution, and every church is shaped in the longing for beauty, relationship and fruitfulness. And everything is subject to falling apart. This is the core of our belief that we need to be redeemed, and that redemption comes solely by grace, through the love of God that comes to us in Jesus Christ. As certain it is that things fall apart, is the equal certainty that the Holy Spirit is working in all things for the glory of God.

Conflicts in congregations have existed for as long as there have been congregations. Where ever people are, there will be more than one point of view on just about everything. One of the ways that leaders can help congregations to be healthy is to help the congregation grow in ways to welcome diversity in opinion, and to talk about differences with grace and hospitality.

For many reasons, conflict can arise in congregations that is unhealthy and becomes increasingly toxic. When this happens, the leaders, including the pastor(s) and the session are responsible to address the dynamics to help the congregation become more resilient and robust in handling challenges.

Every situation is different, and yet there are some dynamics that are typical in conflict situations. One is that conflict escalates and people behave in increasingly unhealthy ways. Another is that conflict is often centered on the pastor or other key leader.

A chief role of the Connecting Our Ministry Commission is to equip leaders to develop their own health and resilience and to lead wisely, especially in times of conflict. COM supports the leaders of congregations to thrive in exercising their leadership.

There are also times that a wise course of action is for the COM to serve as partners to the session in developing a plan to increase the health of a congregation and to address conflict. This may involve developing a plan to address conflict concerning the leadership of the pastor.

Responding with Hope to Improve Situations

Our story as the people of God is a story of hope. We belong to God, and together are the Body of Christ. The Bible is filled with stories of people in conflict, and the redeeming action of God to build the church on the foundation of charity in times of difficulty. We are not alone.

The goal in situations of conflict is to help the situation to improve. Some of the ways that leaders can help congregations to grow in resiliency include:

- Dwelling in the Word together and being shaped by the biblical narrative
- Prayer and other spiritual practices
- Focusing upon the God-given identity, vision, direction and strategy of the congregation
- Deepening gratitude and compassion
- Learning how to have “Crucial Conversations”
- Adopting a Coaching/Equipping Process for the professional development of the pastor and other staff
- Having clear and honest conversations about expectations and agreements about those expectations
- Committing to a Covenant to talk *with* rather than *about* each other, including the pastor
- Adopt the Guiding Principles of the Presbytery of Donegal and a covenant for life together

When the Connecting our Ministry Commission (including presbytery staff who work in this area) begins work with a session, the first step will be develop a plan to focus on health and resiliency. Dissatisfaction with the pastor is often a “presenting problem” that can be a way for the leadership and the congregation to grow in health and maturity through addressing the situation.

There are many resources, including excellent books, proven practices, and conflict mediators to draw upon in developing a plan tailored for the situation.

Dissolving the Pastoral Relationship as a Last Step

If the situation cannot be improved, then the wisest course may be to proceed to plans to dissolve the pastoral relationship and to negotiate a severance plan. This is a decision that is made only after there has been a reasonable attempt to work through challenges.

If this seems to be the wisest course, then the process will be different, depending upon whether the pastor agrees that it is time to dissolve the pastoral relationship.

Developing a Plan to Reduce or Dissolve a Pastoral Call

If efforts to improve a situation do not address the conflict areas, then the wisest course may be to proceed to plans to dissolve the pastoral relationship and to negotiate a severance plan. This is a decision that is made only after there has been a reasonable attempt to work through challenges.

If the session determines, in consultation with COM and within consultation with the pastor, that the pastoral call might need to be dissolved, then a plan shall be developed by the session (including the pastor), in partnership with COM.

The consequences of dissolving the pastoral relationship shall be considered for impact upon the vitality and health of the congregation. If the recommendation is to request that the presbytery dissolve the pastoral relationship, then the session, in consultation with COM, shall adopt a transitional plan for the vacancy period. (See Options for the Vacancy Period after the Departure of the Pastor.) This will include ways to provide for pulpit supply and pastoral care during the severance period.

One option in planning for dissolution is for the pastor to continue in pastoral service, with formal notice given by the vote of the congregation that the pastoral relationship will be dissolved or the terms of call will be reduced on an effective date at least six months in the future.

A second option is to set a more immediate date for the dissolution of the pastoral relationship, followed by a severance period in which compensation and benefits are continued. The presbytery standard for severance agreements includes at least six months of effective salary and continuation of benefits, and often includes a further period of benefits continuation if a new position has not been found.

A third option is to continue in pastoral service for some months of the six-month period, followed by a negotiated severance period in order to look for a new position, i.e. the pastor may serve for three more months, followed by a severance period of at least three months.

Congregational Meetings to Approve the Plan for Dissolution of the Call When the Session, the Pastor and COM Are All in Concurrence

If the pastor, the session, and COM all are in concurrence with the plan adopted by the session, then two meetings of the congregation shall be scheduled, at least two weeks apart.

The agenda for the first meeting will be to explain the situation to the congregation, to provide financial information, and to present the session's recommendation of the plan to dissolve the pastoral call. The presentation shall include the terms of the Severance Agreement as negotiated by the Severance Team, and approved by the session and COM. There shall be a time for questions and comments from the congregation. This meeting shall be moderated by a representative from the presbytery appointed by the Connecting Our Ministry Commission; the moderator will often be the Executive Presbyter or the Stated Clerk.

The second meeting of the congregation may be called for a date at least two weeks after the first meeting, with at least two Sundays in between the meetings. At this meeting, the congregation will vote upon the plan to request that the presbytery dissolve the pastoral relationship. The vote shall include approval of the Severance Agreement.

If the congregation approves the plan as presented, with which the session (including the pastor) and COM have concurred, then COM will give the final approval to the plan and report the actions to the presbytery.

If the congregation modifies the plan without the concurrence of the pastor, or of the session or of COM, then the session shall meet with representatives of COM to consider next steps. The session, including the pastor, may decide to concur with the vote of the congregation, and COM may then vote to approve the plan and report the actions to the presbytery. The session may call another meeting of the congregation to continue to consider options.

If the congregation votes to request that the presbytery dissolve the pastoral relationship, and the pastor is not in concurrence, then COM shall place the matter upon the docket of the next stated meeting of the presbytery. Until that meeting, that pastoral relationship continues at the terms last approved by the presbytery.

Process to Dissolve the Pastoral Relationship When the Congregation, Pastor and Session Are Not in Concurrence

If the session votes to recommend a plan to dissolve the pastoral call, and the pastor does not concur, or if the congregation follows the process in the congregation's by-laws to request that the session call a meeting of the congregation to vote upon whether to request that the presbytery dissolve the pastoral relationship, then two meetings of the congregation shall be scheduled, at least two weeks apart.

The agenda for the first meeting will be to explain the situation to the congregation, to provide financial information, and to present any session recommendations regarding the pastoral relationship. The pastor shall have the opportunity to address the congregation. There shall be a time for questions and comments from the congregation. This meeting shall be moderated by a representative from the presbytery appointed by the Connecting Our Ministry Commission, and will often be the Executive Presbyter or the Stated Clerk.

The second meeting of the congregation may be called after a period of two weeks, with at least two Sundays in between the meetings. At this meeting, the congregation will vote upon the plan recommended by the session regarding the pastoral relationship. The pastor will have the chance to respond. If the congregation votes to request that that presbytery dissolve the pastoral relationship, then the session shall meet to appoint the Severance Negotiation Team. Another meeting of the congregation shall be scheduled to vote upon the Severance Agreement.

If the vote of the congregation does not meet with the concurrence of the pastor, or of the session, or of the COM, then the matter shall be placed upon the docket for action at the next stated meeting of

the presbytery. The pastoral relationship shall continue with the terms last approved by the presbytery until this meeting. Both representatives of the congregation and the pastor may address the presbytery on the reasons why the presbytery should or should not dissolve the relationship, following the process in G-2.0902 and G-2.0903.

The Connecting Our Ministry Commission shall advise the presbytery on whether COM concurs with the request of the congregation to dissolve the pastoral relationship. COM will also advise the presbytery on whether a sufficient Severance Agreement has been adopted by the congregation. If one has not, the presbytery may return the matter to the congregation to adopt a sufficient severance plan that meets presbytery standards. The presbytery may not impose a Severance Agreement upon a congregation, but the presbytery may vote not to dissolve the pastoral relationship until a severance plan is adopted.

In rare circumstances, according to G-2.0904, the presbytery may act to dissolve the pastoral relationship without the concurrence of congregation or pastor, if the presbytery finds the church's mission under the Word imperatively demands it.