

Guidelines for Securing Pastoral Leadership

Commission on Ministry

Approved: December 12, 2024

(based on “On Calling a Pastor” on the PCUSA website)

“...The question before us could be framed thusly: ‘God, whom are you selecting/calling at this time to lead in this church? Show us your choice.’ –

Selecting Church Leaders, The Alban Institute, 2002

The Transition

When a pastor accepts another call or is retiring, the pastor shall inform the presbytery and the session. The session calls a congregational meeting to dissolve the pastoral relationship. The Session should make plans for a celebration of ministry and for pastoral care of the congregation who may feel grief, anxiety, consternation or relief.

Types of Pastoral Leadership

God calls persons to be Ministers of Word and Sacrament and Commissioned Ruling Elders (CRE) to serve congregations in following Jesus Christ. Those called to ministry have completed seminary training and/or have been approved as ready to receive a call if the pastor is looking for a first call.

Installed Pastor is one who, with the concurrence of the presbytery, called/and or installed by a congregation for an indefinite period of time. However, an installed pastor may be called for a designated term by a congregation in consultation with the Commission on Ministry (COM). The term is from three to five years. A designated pastoral position may be renewed or become an indefinite call with the approval of the congregation and the COM.

A Commissioned Ruling Elder is a ruling elder who has completed specific training approved by the presbytery. It is considered a temporary pastoral position because it is a covenant between the church and the CRE that is renewed annually with the approval of the presbytery by the Commission on Ministry (COM) through its Commissioned Ruling Elder Committee.

A Covenant Pastor is a temporary position that can be renewed either every six or twelve months. The Session negotiates a covenant with a pastor and the covenant is approved by the Commission on Ministry (COM) through its Transitional Relations Committee.

An Interim Pastor is a temporary pastoral position and is considered a covenant pastor. The interim pastor will be one who has completed at least the first week of interim training. An interim pastor helps a congregation with issues of transition such as ministering to the emotional state of the congregation, helping the congregation examine the past and do a mission study, strengthening Presbyterian identity or other tasks.

Not Eligible: Ordinarily, an associate pastor or a pastor in a temporary position (such as an interim or a covenant pastor) is not eligible to be called by a congregation to be the next installed pastor. Nor are those in temporary positions eligible to become an installed associate pastor or co-pastor.

A Call or Covenant is a Three-Way Process

Presbyterians believe that God uses prayerful committees rooted in worship and scripture, procedures, to help you discern who it is that God is calling to be your pastor. This call is confirmed as the pastor, the church, and the presbytery each say “yes” to the relationship.

The Mission Study

During the time of transition after a pastor or CRE has left a congregation, the Presbytery of the James asks that your congregation engage in a new mission study as a way to discern the ministry direction in which God is leading you. This should involve

Bible study,
Prayer,
An honest and thoughtful look at your congregation’s strengths and weaknesses and
The needs of the community in which the church is located,

Once the mission study is completed, it is submitted to COM’s Transitional Relationship Committee for approval.

The Search Process

The Session asks the COM for permission to form a pastor nominating committee (PNC). Upon approval, the nominations committee of the congregation nominates persons who are voted upon by the congregation. The PNC shall be representative of the congregation as a whole.

If the Session decides to search for a temporary pastoral relationship, the Session or a committee of the session searches for a covenant pastor.

As your committee begins working together, a number of points should be discussed by your committee:

- Set regular meeting times. The more often you meet, the more quickly the process moves.
- Include time for prayer and scripture study. Before we do the work of the Lord, we focus on God.
- How to build consensus and unity.
- Read Presbytery resource “*On Calling a Pastor*” (see document under COM documents on the Presbytery Website)
- Establish a covenant of agreement among the PNC and hold one another accountable to the terms of your covenant.
- Decide on a chairperson who allows everyone to be heard, can move the committee along and does tasks in a timely manner.
- Decide on a secretary who will keep minutes.

- Decide on the internet contact person who will enter your approved MDP online with CLC; send and receive confidential communication to and from prospective pastors; and access and/or download from CLC all referred PIFs.
- Ensure confidentiality.

The COM provides persons to train the PNC or the Session. The PNC, using the mission study and other information, writes the Mission Discernment Profile (MDP). (See “ON Calling a Pastor” for a detailed explanation for writing the MDP and case studies to help with the process.) The MDP is submitted to COM’s Transitional Relations Committee for approval. After approval, the chairperson of the PNC contacts presbytery staff who will then post MDP on the Church Leadership Connections website if it is for an installed position. The PNC may also choose to advertise in other venues.

If the congregation prefers a covenant pastor, then the Session writes a draft covenant in which priorities for the position are listed. The Session may also write a description of the life of the congregation and its missional direction. The session in consultation with the presbytery staff decides how it will be advertised in the presbytery or multiple presbyteries. The presbytery staff may give names of those who are available.

Interviewing

If a congregation is calling a pastor to an installed position and has had their MDP posted on the denomination website (CLC), the contact person for the PNC will receive Personal Information Forms. Pastors may also self-refer without using CLC. Reference checks should be made on all candidates who end up on the short list of candidates.

The PNC or Session organizes how it will interview. Initial interviews may take place via the internet but it is important to meet final candidates face-to-face. The PNC or Session writes interview questions that address at least the person’s faith journey and spiritual practices, gifts for ministry, theology, denominational identity and specific gifts for the position. A COM liaison may help with this process. Here are sample interview questions.

Describe your passion for ministry.

Tell us about your call to ministry.

How do you achieve personal growth in ministry?

How have you challenged the congregations you have served to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ?

What feeds your soul?

How would you describe your leadership style?

What ministry situations frustrate you most?

When facing a problem, what questions do you naturally ask?

Describe your greatest strengths and abilities.

How do you work with diverse theological perspectives within the congregation?

How do you see the denomination’s future? (Long-term and short-term.)

Tell us about your family traditions as they relate to the faith.

How do you prepare for weekly worship?

What are your spiritual disciplines?

Calling a Pastor or Covenant Pastor

Once a PNC has prayerfully decided on a pastoral candidate, the contact person for the PNC shall ask presbytery executive staff to do a reference check with the pastor's current presbytery executive staff. The results are communicated to the PNC.

The PNC and the pastor discuss and finalize the terms of call.

If the way be clear, both the PNC and the pastor meet with the COM's Examination Committee as to the suitability of the call.

If the way be clear, the Session calls a congregational meeting to vote on the person being placed in nomination by the PNC. Care should be given to providing information about this person to the congregation and provide various ways of welcoming the pastor.

Entering into a Covenant Relationship

On a Session or its committee have prayerfully discern that a person is a good match as a covenant pastor or interim, the covenant (form on the POJ's website) is completed by the clerk of session or committee chair and the pastor. The clerk of session sends the covenant to the COM's Transitional Relations Committee for review and approval.

If the way be clear, the session decides how to provide information on the covenant pastor to the congregation and plans a welcome.

Flow Chart of Securing Pastoral Leadership

