



**NATIONAL CAPITAL**  
**PRESBYTERY**  
Missional · Pastoral · Prophetic

**Policy on Changes in Pastoral Roles Within a Congregation**  
**National Capital Presbytery**  
**Committee on Ministry (COM) Congregational Transitions Commission (CTC)**  
**approved by CTC 9/1/2016 and COM 9/20/2016**

## **Introduction**

For decades, the collective wisdom of the Presbyterian Church (USA) has held that changing a pastor's role from one position to another in the same congregation is rarely in the best interest of the congregation. In fact, until the 2011 revisions to the Form of Government, the Book of Order expressly forbade such pastoral changes. Interim pastors could not be considered for the corresponding permanent position in a congregation. Associate pastors were not eligible to be considered for a senior pastor position, nor could associate pastors become co-pastors.

The Form of Government revised in 2011 sought to change the pattern of creating a rule to address every uncertainty of our life in community. Instead, councils and congregations are encouraged to place God's mission at the heart of their decision-making, and the church is called to apply the broad principles of our polity with creativity and flexibility, with the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Of particular interest has been the degree of flexibility afforded in Book of Order provisions regarding changes in pastoral leadership in a given congregation. This document sets out the policy of the Congregational Transitions Commission (CTC) on how the provisions regarding such changes will be interpreted and applied in National Capital Presbytery (NCP).<sup>1</sup>

Note: NCP has previously authorized converting Stated Supply positions to installed positions under certain conditions. This policy does not apply to those situations.

## **Pastoral Succession in the Book of Order**

With respect to changes in pastoral roles, the current Book of Order states:

- G-2.0504a Installed Pastoral Relationships ... "An associate pastor is *ordinarily* not eligible to be the next installed pastor of that congregation." [emphasis added]

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<sup>1</sup>A presbytery's responsibilities for the care, oversight, and accountability of teaching elders are broadly stated in the Book of Order, G-3.0306 and G-3.0307. In National Capital Presbytery, the Committee on Ministry (COM) handles most of these responsibilities. Matters of pastoral leadership in congregations are primarily carried out by the COM's Congregational Transitions Commission (CTC).

- G-2.0504b Temporary Pastoral Relationships ... "A teaching elder employed in a temporary pastoral relationship is *ordinarily* not eligible to serve as the next installed pastor, co-pastor, or associate pastor." [emphasis added]

The authority for granting exceptions to these provisions is found in the following:

- G-2.0504c Exceptions. "A Presbytery may determine that its mission strategy permits a teaching elder currently called as an Associate Pastor to be eligible to serve as the next installed pastor or co-pastor, or a teaching elder employed in a temporary pastoral relationship to be eligible to serve as the next installed pastor, co-pastor, or associate pastor. Presbyteries that permit this eligibility shall establish such relationships only by a three-fourths vote of the members of presbytery present and voting."

### **The Broad Principles of our Polity regarding Pastoral Transitions**

What are the broad principles that CTC is called upon to apply with creativity and flexibility in these matters?

- A central principle of our theology and polity is the notion that *pastors are called through a process of spiritual discernment*, a deep listening for God's intention for the congregation and the pastor, as free as possible from the limitations of human imagination and bias.
- The relationship between pastor and congregation is unique, and *the policies and practices of the secular world that govern hiring staff do not largely apply to calling a pastor*.
- Over time, the church has learned that congregations are best served by *clean breaks in pastoral relations and that open searches* facilitate a Spirit-led discernment of a congregation's future pastoral leadership.
- Related to this is an understanding that changes in pastoral roles within a congregation should be informed by *what is best for the long-term health and vitality of the congregation* as a whole. This understanding is reflected in the ethical bounds of the pastorate – to make the health and wholeness of the congregation paramount in all decision-making.<sup>2</sup> We should resist efforts to shortcut the search process by promoting staff from within or to use the process for the professional advancement of existing staff.
- Discussions of changes in pastoral role often arise during interim periods. Over the years, the church has embraced the unique role of interim pastors during these "in-between times" in helping congregations come to terms with the past, envision a new identity, and prepare for a healthy relationship with a new pastor. CTC believes strongly that *the effectiveness of an interim pastor in this critical work would be compromised if he/she were permitted to be a candidate for the installed position*.

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<sup>2</sup> National Capital Presbytery, Code of Ethics for Clergy and Other Church Professionals, January 24, 1995, Revised January 24, 2012, section 1(A): "In all professional matters, Teaching Elders are to maintain practices that give glory to Christ; advance the goals of the Church; and nurture, challenge and protect the welfare of church members, parishioners, clients and the public."

## **CTC Policy on Pastoral Transitions**

At the heart of CTC's understanding of current Book of Order provisions is the word *ordinarily*. CTC interprets that to mean that the principles that informed decisions on changes in pastoral roles within a congregation in the past still apply today, and only in *extraordinary* situations should CTC approve exceptions to those principles. In practice, then, the starting point of CTC's policy is the pre-2011 Book of Order prohibitions [G-14.0501(d), G-14.0513(b), and G-14.0513(d)]<sup>3</sup>, while acknowledging that exceptions may be in order, as allowed by the current Book of Order provisions.

Further, CTC notes that exceptions to this policy require a three-fourths vote of the presbytery, a significant hurdle not to be undertaken without prayerful and thorough consideration.

Recognizing that the Holy Spirit continues to move in surprising and unexpected ways, CTC has developed a process for hearing requests for exceptions to NCP's practices.

### **Process for Requesting Exceptions to Ordinary Practices**

CTC will prayerfully consider exceptions to ordinary practices relating to changes in pastoral role in extraordinary, unique situations, on a case-by-case basis. Given the unique nature of each congregation, it is difficult to anticipate the criteria for determining an extraordinary situation that warrants an exception. The Book of Order indicates that exceptions can be granted if the Presbytery determines that its mission strategy supports it. More specifically, it is likely that CTC would prayerfully consider the wisdom of an exception in rare cases, such as when there is significant congregational trauma, when a congregation is particularly fragile, or when a pastor possesses the unique gifts needed to meet a congregation's unique pastoral needs. Similarly, an exception that would result in a substantial benefit to the congregation may be considered.

Requests for exceptions must be made in writing to CTC *by the pastor or pastors requesting the exception*. This request for an exception must be made prior to initiating any formal discussion with others in the congregation or action by the session. The pastor must have been serving the congregation in his or her current role for at least 12 months. The request should state the rationale for the request and describe how the pastor has discerned the need for this exception.

Representatives of CTC will arrange to meet with the pastor for prayer and discussion, and will report to CTC with a recommendation to approve or disapprove the request.

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<sup>3</sup> G-14.0501(d) stated, in part, "...an associate pastor is not eligible to succeed immediately the pastor in a church in which they have served together, nor may the associate pastor be called as a pastor to serve as co-pastor of that church..." G-14.0513(b) stated, in part, "A minister may not be called to be the next installed pastor, co-pastor, or associate pastor of a church served as interim pastor or interim co-pastor." G-14-0513(d) stated, in part, "A temporary supply may not be called to be pastor or associate pastor of a church served as temporary supply..."

- If CTC does not approve the request, the pastor is informed and the process is effectively closed, other than the right to appeal noted below<sup>4</sup>.
- If CTC approves the request, the pastor and the session are informed and advised as to process. The session will be required to enter a time of congregational discernment and may request the counsel of CTC to assist them.
- If, following a time of congregational discernment, the session does not concur in the request for the exception, CTC and the pastor are informed and the process is effectively closed.
- If, following a time of congregational discernment, the session concurs in the request for the exception, CTC arranges for presenting the matter to the Presbytery for a vote.

**For more information**

Questions regarding this policy should be addressed to the Chair of the Congregational Transitions Commission.

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<sup>4</sup> The Presbytery's Manual of Administrative Operations, Section on Committee of Ministry, provides: "A decision of the COM Congregational Transitions Commission can be appealed to the COM Coordinating Commission, which is empowered to overturn any decision of the COM Congregational Transitions Commission."