

Exit interviews

Exit interviews with the departing church professional and with the session are extremely helpful. These interviews help all parties begin to disengage and begin the process of moving forward into the future. This is true whether the person leaving the congregation is an interim pastor who has served the church for a year or so, or a long-term installed pastor who is leaving after many years of service.

Sometimes COMs or sessions decide that an exit interview “isn’t really necessary” or that “we know what the departing pastor will say.” However, exit interviews are almost always helpful for the departing church professional, the congregation, and the COM. In fact, COMs might want to consider encouraging a session to have an exit interview with any departing staff person.

Exit interview models

Exit interview with the departing pastor or departing interim pastor

The liaison or team of persons from the COM should conduct an exit interview with the departing pastor soon after the pastor announces his/her departure. The exit interview helps provide closure for the pastor and family. It also provides information that may be helpful to the COM as it works with the congregation during its search.

1. Ask the pastor to talk about things she/he feels good about their work with the congregation.

2. Ask about barriers to effective ministry. These barriers might be in the congregation, or community, or the pastor.

3. Ask about the relationship between the pastor and session.

Exit interview with the session

It is best to conduct the exit interview with the session after the pastoral relationship has been dissolved. The interview helps the congregation begin to disengage from the pastor. The Moderator of session appointed by presbytery should be present for this interview.

1. Discuss positive growth in the life of the congregation during the pastor's time with the congregation.
2. Discuss any difficulties there might have been in the relationship between the pastor and session/congregation.
3. Discuss ways the session might build a strong relationship with the next pastor.
4. Discuss appropriate and inappropriate contact with the congregation after the pastor has left. This is important. See (5) above.
5. Plan ways the session might lead the congregation to disengage with the former pastor, associate or other staff person.

support the formation of a strong bond between the new pastor and the congregation, a former pastor should wait an appropriate amount of time before re-entering the congregation formerly served, and then only after a careful conversation with the new pastor about her or his wishes in this matter.

A former pastor of a congregation is wise to avoid conversations about what has happened in the church after her or his departure. Under no circumstances should the former pastor indicate to church members disapproval or disappointment about the decisions or leadership of the interim pastor or the new installed pastor. The former pastor will inevitably have only partial information about any event or decision within the congregation he or she used to serve. In any case, for the former pastor to comment negatively about the current leadership of the church is unhelpful and inappropriate. The greatest tribute to the leadership of the former pastor is a congregation that continues to thrive with a new pastor.

Finding temporary leadership

The session is responsible for providing regular worship and other services for the congregation. During the time between the departure of the installed pastor and the arrival of the interim pastor, if one is used, the session will take a much more active part in every aspect of the leadership of the congregation. Among other responsibilities, the session finds guest preachers and pastors able to provide emergency pastoral care. Most presbyteries maintain a pulpit supply list of ministers and Commissioned Lay Pastors willing to conduct worship services and provide pastoral care on a temporary basis.

This is an especially good time for a Commission on Ministry to encourage congregations to consider women and/or racial-ethnic pastors as preachers or for a temporary pastoral relationship. Congregations that have not experienced the gifts of clergywomen or racial ethnic ministers may discover that they have a greater spirit of inclusiveness and openness than they have previously known. The COM may also want to appoint women and racial ethnic ministers to serve as moderators of sessions, and add the names of women and racial ethnic ministers and candidates to the pulpit supply list for the presbytery.