

# A Ministry Covenant

*When Pastors Retire/Resign from Ministry & Seek to Retain Their Membership in the Congregation*

## Introducing the Concept of a Ministry Covenant

When pastors accept calls, tender resignations, or retire but still reside within driving distance from their previous congregation, it is helpful to have a working covenant to define the boundaries of the new relationship with their former congregation. This becomes even more essential if they are retiring and staying as members the congregation over which they served as the called pastor. Their former congregation has not yet had the opportunity to grow in love with another shepherd.

Pastors who have been faithful to the pastoral needs of a congregation struggle to find an appropriate response to those who request them to officiate at baptisms, funerals, and weddings. Even the most sensitive and caring pastoral heart can easily overlook important boundaries and put themselves and/or the new pastor\* in challenging places if they do not consider the impact or precedent they may be setting as they respond to one individual's request. Without intending it they may impact the congregation and pastoral relationship with the next pastor in a negative way.

*\*In this document "new pastor" refers to the vacancy, interim, or next settled pastor.*

The purpose of the ministry covenant is for the former pastor, representatives of the congregation and the new pastor to form a covenant agreement describing how they will support one another. While the needs of the former pastor and spouse are important, the well-being of the congregation and the relationship with their new pastor is the priority. Of course, the relationship between the retiring/resigning pastor can be a wonderful asset to the congregation and future ministry if all parties are able to work together in a trusted, loving relationship.

An ever-changing landscape of ministry requires this to be a working document that is put in place initially and renewed annually or on the basis of new situations. The change from vacancy or interim pastor to new settled pastor would trigger the need for all parties to gather together to review and renew the covenant accounting for the new relationship. Thereafter having an annual conversation and renewal of the covenant making appropriate changes will give opportunity for the body of Christ to be edified through the relationships.

## A Ministry Covenant

### 1. Thanksgiving

A statement giving thanks for the ministry of the former pastor and spouse

### 2. Our Intentions for the immediate future

- A. A statement from the pastor and spouse that describes their plans for church involvement for the first 12 months following the pastors last Sunday
- B. A statement from the congregation leader and the new pastor identifying specific ways they will support the pastor and his wife spiritually and relationally during this transition time

### 3. How We Live Out Our Agreement Given Certain Situations

- A. A statement describing how all parties to the covenant handle requests for pastoral service from the former pastor

- B. A statement about attendance at weddings, funerals, baptisms when the former pastor and spouse are specifically invited during the initial transition time
- C. A statement about the role of the spouse within the congregation
- D. A statement about the pastor and spouse's relationship with personal friends within the congregation
- E. A statement about emergency situations causing the covenant agreement to be set aside for a time

**4. Process of Re-engagement Following the Initial Transition Time**

A statement describing the process parties to the covenant will use at the end of the transition time to welcome the pastor and spouse back into the congregation. The statement should include the communication plan for the congregation about upcoming re-engagement.

**5. Covenant Renewal**

- A. A statement describing involvement of former pastor and spouse within the congregation based on their interest and needs within the congregation
- B. A statement of how all parties to the covenant handle requests being made by congregation members to the former pastor
- C. A statement describing the former pastor's involvement in congregation decisions especially if he disagrees with the direction
- D. Identify how the covenant will be evaluated, by whom, and when

Signature of Former Pastor and Spouse: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Vacancy/Interim/Settled Pastor: \_\_\_\_\_

Representative of Congregation: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Proposed Renewal Date (within 12 months): \_\_\_\_\_

**Notes on the Covenant**

This section gives commentary and details to further explain the covenant.

Notes on Part I. Introducing the Concept of a Ministry Covenant – (Page 1)

*A Ministry Covenant – A Relational-Spiritual Resource* – The concept of a covenant is a most helpful tool. Certainly, covenant language is part of our faith language. From Genesis on, we read of the covenants God put in place between Himself and his people. Through Old and New Testaments, our heavenly Father understood our human condition and our subsequent inability to keep our part of the bargain – and gave us His Son, as the covenant keeper in our stead. In Scripture, we recognize the covenant was not limited between God and His people – covenants were put in place between people.

*Covenants vs Contracts* – While contracts are useful legal tools, they are not designed speak to the covenant relationship we enjoy within the body of Christ. Covenants are built on the mutual understanding we have as God's children who love and care for one another. While contracts are often written between parties to protect their respective interests – covenants protect the relationship. While they establish boundaries and commitment, they are built on the foundation and motivation of love.

*Parties to the Covenant* – The working principle behind a covenant is this: a covenant manages agreement. It is always easier to manage and celebrate agreement than to resolve conflict. The decision to put a covenant agreement in place is a proactive decision to honor the relationship between all parties. The key parties include:

- The new pastor of the congregation
- The members of the congregation (represented by the leaders)
- The former pastor and spouse

While representatives of the congregation represent the congregation in putting the covenant in place and administering the details of the covenant, the congregation needs to be informed about the rationale behind the covenant (whatever is appropriate for the larger congregation to know).

*Timing* – While agreements may be put in place in which the former pastor and spouse do not attend worship at their former congregation for a period of time (usually 12 months), the next settled pastor has not arrived within that time frame. During the first 12 months, the congregation will meet their vacancy pastor and other supply pastors. Most likely the call process will take the congregation into the second year before they first meet their next settled pastor. If the covenant agreement does not extend beyond this first 12 month separation time, there is little or no opportunity for the next pastor of the congregation to be involved in the agreement and design of the covenant. For that reason, a covenant which is updated and renewed annually will allow the new pastor to have a role in shaping the relationship.

*Key Aspects of the Covenant Relationship* – If the pastor and spouse are remaining in the congregation, it is important that all parties agree to participate and honor the covenant relationship. That would include:

- Agreement to use the covenant and renewal of covenant process to define the relationship
- Periodic evaluation and renewal of the covenant relationship
- Appropriate changes made to the covenant on the basis of changing circumstances (such as the calling of a new pastor)
- Use of our spiritual tools (prayer, confession and absolution, God’s Word, etc.) in shaping the relationship, especially during challenging times
- Celebration of the covenant relationship at time of successful completion of the covenant with the pastors, spouses, and leaders of the congregation

*Covenant Agreements Pertaining to the Spouse* – In situations where pastor and spouse are retaining their membership in the congregation, it may also be helpful to include agreements about the role of the spouse depending on her involvement within congregation when her husband served as pastor. The spouse of the former pastor often goes through greater difficulty than the pastor – due to the sense of loss of key relationships. Spiritual, emotional, relational care for both the former pastor and his spouse is a critical aspect of these transitions.

Notes on Part II. A Ministry Covenant – (page 2)

1. (II.1) *Thanksgiving for the past*

Covenants begin with a recognition of the past relationship (Exodus 20:1-2). A statement might look like this:

“We celebrate the goodness of God, who by Holy Spirit design, brought Pastor and Spouse names and \_\_\_\_\_ Lutheran Church together serving from

Date to Date. We cherish many blessings God has given pastor and people during this time of mission and ministry service. This covenant is put in place to honor our relationship with (Pastor and Spouse names) and the people of \_\_\_\_\_ Lutheran Church.”

2. *(II.2.) Our Intentions for the immediate future*

(II.2.A) Your statement may want to identify the overall goal on which the stipulations of the covenant are based. This covenant is not only describing the behaviors of the former pastor and spouse, but also the congregation, and new pastor. Following are some examples of potential details of the covenant. It might be introduced with words like this:

“While we look forward to a continual relationship in future years, we also recognize there needs to be a time of separation to prepare all of our hearts to receive ministry of the Word and Sacraments through our new shepherd. While we will agree to part ways for a period of time, our intention is to put a plan in place through which our relationship will continue to bless one another and the Lord’s kingdom.”

“We, \_\_\_\_\_ (Names of Pastor and Spouse) agree to worship in neighboring congregations for the next \_\_\_\_ months, during the time of vacancy or intentional Interim ministry and until the next settled pastor begins to serve this congregation.”

While our intention will be to return beyond that time, if the new pastor has not yet arrived, we are willing to time our return after the next settled pastor has had opportunity to transition into the ministry in this place.

(II.2.B.) A statement describing the use of spiritual of resources to support one another

The former pastor and spouse will undoubtedly experience real challenge as they go through this time of separation. All parties to the covenant may want to identify the specific vehicle through which the pastor/spouse are receiving spiritual care during this time. This is especially important if other LCMS congregations are not within easy driving distance for the former pastor and spouse.

It may be important to note that all spiritual resources will be used to support the ongoing relationship between all three parties. Examples of those resources include: God’s Word, the Sacraments, prayer with and for one another, mutual confession and absolution, encouragement, admonition, and mutual spiritual care.

It may be appropriate for the covenant to highlight the need to always speak positively about each party to the covenant – even when approached by those struggling with new leadership or congregation decisions with which the pastor/spouse are not in agreement. The former pastor and spouse agree to respond with encouragement and support for the pastor and the leadership of the congregation. The new pastor will take every opportunity to speak good words about the former pastor and spouse. Luther’s explanation of the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment is a helpful guide.

3. *(II.3) How We Live Out Our Agreement Given Certain Situations*

This part of the covenant is critical. It serves as the guide for the actual behaviors of all parties during the initial separation period. It is a time when the former pastor and spouse and the members of the congregation are vulnerable because they are experiencing the transition and loss of significant

relationships. Personalities and circumstances will determine the specifics of this section. Following are some examples of specific topics you may want to include.

(II.3.A.) A statement describing how all parties to the covenant handle requests for pastoral service from the former pastor

It is especially important for the former pastor to communicate that he hopes the people of the congregation will provide the same opportunity for the new pastor to serve them as they afforded him. This is the way the trusted shepherd relationship begins. He can use this as an opportunity to redirect those seeking pastoral services to the new pastor.

All agreed upon (before retirement/resignation) pastoral acts for members of the congregation/community need to be honored, if deemed by all parties to the covenant to be appropriate requests. As such, each of those agreements should be identified.

If requested for any kind of pastoral service, all parties to the covenant will encourage those making the request to know about the actual covenant to which all parties have agreed. We will lovingly remind those inquiring that if we would agree to serve them it would not be fair to the rest of the congregation who is abiding under the covenant we all put in place together.

Should a situation arise in which the pastor (vacancy, interim, next called pastor) requests the presence and assistance of the former pastor/spouse, the covenant agreement shall be put aside for that specific request.

(II.3.B.) A statement about attendance at weddings, funerals, baptisms when the former pastor and spouse are specifically invited during the initial transition time

It takes great discipline for pastors and spouses to refrain from attending funerals, weddings, and baptisms of former members, especially when they receive invitations. Congregation leaders can assist the former pastor and spouse by publishing and explaining the covenant agreement to the congregation. The pastor and spouse do not want their absence to be understood in a negative way. This is a heart-struggle for them.

While there may certainly be exceptions to the rule, it will be to the congregation's benefit if the former pastor and spouse can maintain the covenant agreement to not be present for the agreed upon amount of time. Rather than attending the service, they can still reach out personally to the family during this initial time with appropriate cards, phone calls, gifts and prayers. In that way, the pastor and spouse can maintain the covenant but still communicate their love for the people of the congregation.

Should there be a desire to attend a worship event in one of these circumstances, this would be a time when the parties to the covenant can discuss the request and make an appropriate decision.

(II.3.C.) A statement about the role of the spouse within the congregation

Some spouses have supported the ministry by working quietly in the background while other spouses have participated in ministries, and taken significant leadership roles. In all cases it is very important the ministry of the spouse is recognized.

If the spouse has been active in ministries, it is important that the spouse inform those congregation ministries in which she has participated of the covenant agreement, her future absence, and her resignation from leadership roles. This should be done prior to her husband's last Sunday in office.

It would also be respectful and helpful if those involved in those ministries offer opportunity for the spouse to have an exit interview (if appropriate) and to offer the appropriate opportunity for thanksgiving and recognition of her service in places where she has served as the leader prior to the last Sunday.

If those things have happened appropriately a simple statement indicating the spouse will also be absent from the worship and ministry life of the congregation during this transition would be appropriate.

(II.3.D.) A statement about the pastor and spouse's relationship with personal friends within the congregation

A sample statement: "Friendships within the congregation, but outside the official role of pastor and spouse, are to be maintained and encouraged. The pastor and spouse are encouraged to continually use words and attitudes to maintain support of all parties to the covenant, even if negative situations are reported to them. In addition, those bringing concern or complaint should always be directed to bring their concern directly to the new pastor."

(II.3.E) A statement about emergency situations causing the covenant agreement to be set aside for a time

There may be situations in which any of the parties to the covenant request the covenant agreement be put aside for a time. For example: if the former pastor or spouse should experience a health crisis, it would be appropriate for them to experience the pastoral care and the support of their former congregation.

4. *(II.4) Process of Re-engagement Following the Initial Transition Time*

As the pastor and former spouse come back within the congregation it is helpful to update the covenant to reflect the re-engagement.

- Describe how the former pastor and spouse are welcomed back to the congregation and specific communication that will assist smooth re-integration
- Describe the working relationship between the new pastor and former pastor
- Based on a number of factors, the new settled pastor may choose to involve the former pastor in a variety of pastoral tasks and ministries per the agreement between the parties to the covenant. These should be updated in the covenant on an annual basis.

5. *(II.5) Covenant Renewal*

(II.5.A.) Some congregations have struggled as former pastors/spouses have gotten involved in the boards/committees of the congregation should there be a difference in the philosophy of ministry or direction between the new pastor and the former pastor.

(II.5.B.) As the former pastor reintegrates into the congregation, it is important for the new and former pastor to outline the way they will handle requests to the former pastor

(II.5.C.) This is opportunity for the new and former pastor to agree to have times together behind a closed door to disagree with one another, but that in public forum the former pastor would give verbal support to the direction of the new pastor, ministry staff, and congregation

(II.5.D.) The evaluation of the covenant needs to be the responsibility of someone in the leadership of the congregation on an annual basis. Many times the difficult situations that happen with the ministry staff and former pastors/spouses emerge years after they have come back into the congregation.