



Call Process Manual – Step 1 – The Current Pastor Resigns

This manual describes the call process used in the Southwestern Minnesota Synod. A pastoral vacancy is not an occasion for going it alone! The synod office staff certainly desire to be in partnership with you and helpful to you during this transition. The following process affords the congregation and the synod office the opportunity to work together in a manner that is efficient and positive.

The time of calling a pastor is a special time for reflection and prayer in the life of a congregation. The congregation council should intentionally provide leadership to the congregation during this interim time, encouraging strong bonds of unity and trust in God, and exercising sensitive care for all the people of the congregation. This is an important time of transition: a time of self-discovery, decision making, and looking ahead to the future.

When the pastor resigns or retires, the primary concern for many congregations is to find a new pastor quickly. No one can guarantee how long the call process will take. Most congregations greatly underestimate the time needed for completion of the call process. Congregations are encouraged not to hurry the process of calling a new pastor. The interim period between the leaving of one pastor and the arrival of another gives the congregation a valuable time for reassessing its mission and possibly reordering its ministry for the future. This can be a great opportunity for renewing the vision of your congregation.

Saying Goodbye Well

All kinds of emotions surface when you learn that your pastor has resigned or is preparing to retire. One layer of work in a transition is emotional. People will experience shock as the news breaks. After the initial announcement, people often find themselves preferring to deny the coming change. When the reality of the losses and change begins to sink in, people often experience feelings of panic and abandonment. Feelings of anger and resentment also surface often as your pastor's ministry comes to an end. Sometimes people experience guilt because they wonder if somehow they caused the pastor to seek a new call. Others will bargain with the pastor or God trying to work a deal that would return the relationship to what once was. Eventually people begin to accept and work through their feelings about their pastor's departure. All of these feelings are complicated by the fact that we grieve and mourn in different ways and at different paces.

Saying goodbye well is a lot of work for the pastor and congregation. There are records to be brought up to date (see **Resources** below for "Attestation of Record and Completion of Financial Obligations"). There are important visits to close relationships with leaders, special friends, and shut-ins. Preparations begin in the council to identify a pastor for the interim. Preparations for some kind of goodbye celebration, roast, or party are put together (see **Resources** for "Liturgy for Departure of a Pastor"). Time grows short. Everyone tries to grab one last quality time. Pastors and leaders work to stabilize and hand off ministries. The trouble with ministry is that it is never finished.



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A transition also marks the beginning of a new stage in the faith adventure of your life together. The congregation and pastor leave the comfort of what they have known and journey out into the wilderness of change. Beneath the emotional, organizational, and relational work, a transition is a time of prayer, lament, spiritual growth, fears, and hope. Through all the seasons, God journeys beside you. Through especially the difficult times, we give thanks that we have a Lord who knows suffering and has the power to resurrect us from all of our graves.

Part of saying goodbye well is establishing healthy boundaries. The pastor who leaves is to do no pastoral ministry in their former parish or community (see **Resources** for “Pastoral Ethics” for both pastors and congregations).

In the midst of all the change, remember as a congregational leader to keep your mission in focus. You are a community of people who share one thing in common, you follow Jesus Christ our Lord. Some of your ministries will be pruned by leaders’ decisions or a lack of energy. Invite new people to step forward to oversee the congregation’s ongoing ministries. Connect with your synod minister and the synod office. Begin the process of identifying pastoral leadership for during the transition. Increase the level of communication with the congregation. Trust God more strongly still and step forward in faith.

The Exit Interview

Prior to the pastor’s departure, an opportunity is set aside for an exit interview. The synod office staff makes arrangements with an interviewer to contact the pastor to schedule a time for this visit. The exit interview is designed to help bring closure to the pastor’s ministry and to assist the synod office in helping to select possible candidates to fill the vacancy. In the event the pastor’s departure has occurred without an exit interview, it may be advisable for the congregation to share their thoughts and feelings regarding the pastor’s departure.

If there has been unresolved conflict associated with the departure of the pastor, it is important to reconcile those feelings prior to the arrival of the new pastor. The structure of these sessions should be open and positive, but avoiding any effort at “bashing” the departing pastor. The focus should be on finding resolution, self examination, learning from mistakes, and preparing for the leadership of a new pastor.

Resources

- + 1A – Attestation of Record and Certification of Completion of Financial Obligations
- + 1B – Liturgy for Departure of a Pastor
- + 1C – Pastoral Ethics: Pastors Relating to Previously Served Parishes
- + 1D – Pastoral Ethics: The Ethics of Pastoral Transition
- +1E – Sample Call Process Timetable

Note: All resources will be provided by the synod office and are available under Call Process Manual at www.swmnelca.org.