

Pastoral Vacancy

Pastoral Relations Committee

"SO YOU'RE GOING TO BE WITHOUT PASTORAL LEADERSHIP?"

Dear Friends,

At this moment you probably don't know exactly what you feel, or are supposed to feel. You've just found out that your pastor has accepted a call to become the pastor of another congregation. Or, they have recently given notice that they will be, or have resigned from ministry as part of your church. You know different people feel differently about all this. Some people, if they are honest, are 'glad' the pastor is leaving. There may be a variety of feelings and reasons behind that point of view. Other people are 'devastated' that this leader would leave and wonder what will happen now. Some just aren't sure what they feel, or should feel.

Under the best of circumstances what you are experiencing is something that has happened throughout all of God's history with his people, the church. God has moved a leader away to a new assignment, and is preparing to bring a new leader to a people he has, and still does, love. As this sentence is being written there is no way of knowing the exact mix of reasons, feelings, and experiences that is flowing through the life of your congregation. The place to begin is to commit yourself to prayer. First, pray that this move is the result of the direct hand of God. Second, if there have been sinful attitudes, words, or even actions, spend time as leaders and as a congregation confessing what must be brought before God before full healing can occur. Especially if there are no painful 'issues,' do your best to explain to members of the congregation that God has done the very same sort of thing throughout all of his history, including his history with your congregation. God draws the lines of our lives. God determines who will lead us, and for what period of our, and their, life. Remember, God does not bless only two sides of a triangle. If this is God's will for your pastor, and for the church to which they will go, then it is also God's will for your life. He can be trusted, especially now.

The next months may be difficult, demanding, even confusing, but God is not far away, indeed he is at the very heart of bringing you to a new place and a new day. Sad as this time is, it is also a clear sign that God is at work, and that he has a plan.

Yours in Christ,
The Members of Pastoral Relations

Suggested Steps & Helpful Things to Remember During a Pastoral Vacancy

1. If the pastor has not yet left, you will want to consider an appropriate way of expressing your gratitude. You may want to consider some kind of event, or even a gift. You will also want to provide for a healthy sense of closure and farewell.
2. Your pastor has given their full attention to the work of your church each week and every week. There are many, many things that have been done on an ongoing basis. It may be wise for

you to establish a *Transition Team* who could sit down with the pastor, compile a list of items that will need ongoing attention, and determine who will be responsible for each of those items during a vacancy. In this way, important parts of your ministry will not be 'dropped' before anyone really realizes that no one has assumed responsibility for those tasks.

3. Please remember that you will need to request of classis that they document the dissolution of the pastoral relationship between your church and your pastor. **This must happen.** The form, *Application for the Dissolution of a Pastoral Relationship*, is found on page 130 of the 2000 edition of the Reformed Church's *Book of Church Order (BCO)*, and may be copied or reproduced from that source, or secured from the classis Stated Clerk.

4. At its 2001 October meeting, Zeeland Classis approved for inclusion in this packet a document entitled, "A Covenant of Separation." You are asked to carefully consider this document, and use it at your discretion. As a committee, Pastoral Relations strongly recommends its use.

5. As a classis, we encourage you to consider a Specialized Interim Minister (SIM). While a SIM is not for everyone, many times a church can benefit greatly from the skills of these trained ministers. Their goal and purpose is to help churches ask the right questions during a vacancy period. In this way a church's search for a next pastor can be carried out with an added sense of clarity and purpose. In addition, as ministry has become increasingly complex and demanding, it often helps to have someone to attend to day-to-day matters of ministry. When you schedule only '*Sunday Preachers*' it soon becomes obvious that 'someone else' needs to attend to a host of other items during the week. Churches without consistent day-to-day management can experience difficulty in maintaining the effectiveness of their ministry. While it may seem strange at first to pay a full time salary to someone who will be intentionally short term, many churches speak highly of their SIM experience and are quick to recommend this possibility to others.

6. Obviously a Search Committee will need to be appointed. The Reformed Church in America has an excellent packet that helps churches walk their way through a time of vacancy.

7. During your vacancy the classis will appoint a Supervisor to assist you until that time when God has brought you your next pastor. Please note: Even if you pursue a SIM, your Supervisor has an important role to play in your ongoing decisions and future direction. As explained, it is the Supervisor who is responsible to maintain adequate communication between church leadership and classis responsibilities.

8. Classis has determined that all ordained clergy who are moving between classis churches, or who are being transferred to another classis, will be asked to participate in an *Exit Interview*. Classis policy in this area can be found in (DOCUMENT 2). In addition, we have provided a set of questions that have been approved as those to be used for this interview (DOCUMENT 3).

9. When that time (finally) comes and you are ready to present a name (or names) to the congregation for their consideration, it is very important that you communicate those intentions to the classis. The Reformed Church Book of Church Order (BCO) requires a classis to approve all calls extended by churches within their boundaries. Included with this packet is a policy statement of how that happens in this classis (DOCUMENT 4). As stated, it is our intention to complete our portion of the steps of this process during that time period between when you have called for a congregational meeting and when that meeting is held. Classis holds general supervisory responsibility over the churches within their boundaries. Our work is intended to be

a means of helping and assisting the decisions of the local church. We work in partnership, we since we have a delegated role to play in the search process, we sincerely want to act responsibly according to those roles and requirements.

10. In order for the classis to approve a call, there is information we need to know before we can complete our task. Included is a form that we ask you to complete and forward to the Pastoral Relations Committee (DOCUMENT 5).

11. Once you have extended a call we encourage you to invite your people to prayer during the time provided a pastoral candidate to discern God's will (usually up to three weeks). Cards, notes, and letters of encouragement are often helpful to a pastor who now has to make a potentially life changing decision.

12. In the event that the pastor to whom you have extended a call declines to accept that call, you will need to guard against excessive disappointment. Simply because they have said "No," does not mean you made a 'mistake.' God always has the bigger picture in mind, and he may well have had another goal for your encounter with each other outside of bringing you together for ministry. Seek to discern what God may be teaching, and begin to work toward your next sense of that person to whom God would have you extend a call.

13. In the event that the pastor to whom you have extended a call accepts, there will be a number of tasks to begin to attend to. Among them, the classis will need to set a day for a service of installation. Again, guidelines have been provided (DOCUMENT 6).

14. Once your pastor arrives, it is the policy of the Zeeland Classis to appoint a Mentor to assist them as they seek to become acclimated to a new area and a new ministry. Also, Zeeland Classis has determined we will establish a S.E.A (support, encouragement, accountability) Team for each new Senior Pastor relationship within classis. Guidelines regarding Mentors and S.E.A. Teams have been included with this packet, along with a sample cover letter and a sample S.E.A. Team meeting agenda. (DOCUMENTS 7-10).