

Policy: Associate or Interim Pastor Succeeding a Pastor/Head of Staff

Committee on Ministry, Presbytery of Baltimore
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BACKGROUND

Until the new Form of Government was approved by a majority of presbyteries in 2011, the PC(USA) Book of Order expressly forbade associate pastors from becoming the installed pastor within the same congregation without a break in service away from that congregation. The current Book of Order (G-2.0504a) states, “An associate pastor is ordinarily not eligible to be the next installed pastor of that congregation.” Section G-2,0504b adds, “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.” These statements reflect a longstanding belief that such transitions are usually not in the best interest of the church.

However, the Book of Order (G-2.0504c) allows for exceptions: “A presbytery may determine that its **mission strategy** permits a minister of the Word and Sacrament currently called as an Associate Pastor to be eligible to serve as the next installed pastor or co-pastor, or a minister of the Word and Sacrament 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.” Given that these possibilities are now available, the Committee on Ministry believes that it will be helpful to state how requests for such exceptions will be administered and judged.

The traditional bias against allowing immediate succession within a congregation centers on two issues: the value of the interim period and the possibility of creating division within a congregation.

The Committee on Ministry affirms that the **process of calling a pastor must be rooted in a process of spiritual discernment** - the individual church must engage in a Spirit-led listening for God’s direction. This process should be open to all possibilities and not over-shadowed by any preconditions. Even after highly successful pastorates, it is usually desirable to allow an interim pastor to conduct a time of reflection about the manner in which the church is called to its ministries. The congregation needs to be able to address its past, envision new possibilities for its identity, and prepare itself for a healthy and fruitful relationship with a new pastor. This is most easily achieved through the guidance and special talents of an interim pastor. An assumption that a current associate or the interim pastor will be considered for the position can color the process, limiting consideration of new directions for the church and new roles for its pastor(s).

Similarly, **the transition of an associate or interim pastor to the position of installed pastor/head of staff is rife with possibilities for dissension and division within a congregation.** Pastor Nominating Committees, while keeping the session and congregation generally apprised of their progress, usually conduct the actual search process in confidence. If the congregation is aware that an associate or interim pastor is among the candidates, the PNC will likely be placed in an awkward position of being subject to lobbying for and against the idea. When the PNC is ready to present a candidate, the congregation usually has little or no knowledge of the candidate before that introduction and the candidate sermon. The congregation should be ready and excited for a new beginning, and most pastors would be leery of accepting a call unless the congregational vote is nearly unanimous.

In the case of an associate or interim pastor seeking the position, both the congregation and pastor need to consider the implications of accepting a less than unanimous vote. An 80% approval rate in a political election would be considered a landslide mandate. In the case of calling a pastor, however, a 20% “no” vote places the pastor in a very difficult position from which to begin a pastorate. It also highlights a division within the church which may be difficult or impossible to overcome. An associate pastor also needs to consider the impact of declining a call that is not nearly unanimous. Even though they do not accept the call, it may be difficult to minister to a congregation which is obviously conflicted about their gifts. It seems unlikely that they will be able to remain in their position, especially once a new pastor is chosen.

PROCEDURE

Inasmuch as the Book of Order notes that associate and interim pastors are **ordinarily** not eligible to be the next installed pastor, COM will recommend such exceptions only when there are clearly demonstrated **extraordinary** circumstances. By definition, extraordinary circumstances are rare. They might include extremely fragile congregations, churches suffering from significant trauma, or pastors who possess gifts uniquely suited to the needs of a particular church.

1. **MIF completed:** In order to allow the interim assessment and discernment process to proceed with integrity, the assumption during the beginning of that process must be that the associate or interim pastor is not eligible to be installed. Indeed, the associate or interim pastor cannot reasonably discern whether they feel called to the position before the self-assessment process takes place and a new position description is created. Associate and interim pastors shall not indicate their willingness or desire to be considered until the following steps are completed in the following order:

- the church completes a COM approved self-assessment process,
- a PNC is elected by the congregation,
- the PNC completes an MIF, and
- the MIF is approved by the session and COM.

A premature announcement may, by itself, be sufficient reason for COM to recommend against the installation of an associate or interim pastor.

2. **Associate or Interim Pastor meets with COM to indicate interest:** Once the MIF is approved, an associate or interim pastor who wishes to be considered for an installed position must first consult with the COM Leadership Team **before** indicating their desire to the PNC. The pastor and COM Leadership Team will consider the rationale for such an exception and the potential impact on the congregation and its relationship with the pastor. Upon approval by the COM Leadership Team, the associate or interim pastor may submit his or her name to the PNC.

3. **PNC selects Associate or Interim:** A PNC which proposes to call an associate or interim pastor to be installed must meet with the COM and demonstrate that a good faith effort to consider a significant number of candidates has been made **before** presenting the candidate to the congregation. They must be able to enumerate the gifts and talents possessed by the associate or interim pastor which are lacking from all other candidates. The COM may also choose to meet with the candidate and/or session. COM approval of a request to present an associate or interim pastor as the selected candidate to the congregation shall require an affirmative vote of at least three-fourths of the COM members voting.

4. **Congregational Meeting:** The candidate having been presented to the congregational meeting as a candidate, the PNC and session shall report the results of the congregational vote to the COM. If the COM determines that the vote does not constitute extremely strong support (at

least 90%) for installing the associate or interim pastor, further consultations may be required before a recommendation is made to the presbytery. COM retains the right to rescind its recommendation for approval after such consultations.

5. **Presbytery approves call with exception:** Upon a finding by the COM that an exception allowing an associate or interim pastor to be installed is warranted, COM shall make that recommendation at the next Presbytery Gathering, providing a detailed explanation of the work done by the PNC and the reasoning behind the recommendation. The PNC and candidate shall be present and ready to answer any questions from the presbytery. In accordance with the Book of Order, **approval by the presbytery requires a three-fourths vote of the members of presbytery present and voting.** Individual churches retain the right to petition the presbytery for approval without an affirmative recommendation from the COM.

NOTE: Any deviation from this process by the associate or interim pastor, the PNC, the session, and/or the congregation without the concurrence of the COM may, by itself, be sufficient reason for COM to recommend against the installation of an associate or interim pastor.