Pastoral Succession Process Q & A w/ Chaz Ruark

Sunday, January 30, 2022

Chaz Ruark started with an introduction: He has been the Executive Presbyter of the Lakes and Prairies Synod for 7 years, previously 25 years as a Pastor for multiple congregations.

Chaz came to FPC to talk about the transitional process for Pastor Kirk’s impending retirement. He stated that it’s important to know that the process does not happen quickly. It is a slow process.

When someone has served as long as our Pastor Kirk has (going on 32 years now), it is important to have an interim pastor. We should keep in mind that the emotional and spiritual bond between pastor and congregation is strong, especially with long-term pastors like Kirk. The congregation will need to disconnect and move on, which is done at different speeds depending on the person. Expect that there will be a grieving/healing process that the congregation will go through.

Interim pastors are trained on getting congregations through the time of separation from the leaving pastor before committing to a new permanent relationship with a new pastor. The past has shown that the interim is vital in helping the next new permanent pastor succeed as it helps the congregation grieve and move on from a previous pastor. They interim pastor focuses on what should happen in the transition and will help us look to the future. They work with the Session and the Pastor Nominating Committee to help hone in on what we’re looking for in a new pastor. They will help with existing committees and ensure things continue to move forward in a positive direction.

Interims are typically at an assignment for a year, starting with a year-long contract. It could run longer, if there are major issues to clean up. If a new pastor comes in too soon, it often does not work out. Chaz shared an example of an interim who was in place for about 4 years.

If our church is making good progress and is ready sooner, the interim pastor could leave before a year with 30 days’ notice.

Interim pastors are hired by the Session and are in short supply right now.

Typical process is:

1. Right after current pastor leaves, there may be visiting pastors or lay leaders handling the sermons and services for a while during a transition to the interim. This is called “pulpit supply.” This also gives the congregation a chance to hear other voices. Pastor Ben will also continue preaching during this time period. (2-3 months).
2. Interim pastor will start a couple of months after Kirk’s retirement and stay for about a year. The interim pastor could begin sooner, if a good candidate is found and Session agrees to hire.
3. Pastor Nominating Committee starts after interim pastor has been selected and taken office and the John Knox Presbytery gives the green light to start the committee.

We need to trust God has a plan and depend on the Holy Spirit. Know that God already has a person in mind to be the new pastor. Now we just need to find each other!

Also be aware that Pastor Ben’s role will continue as it is currently. He cannot ascend to the permanent senior pastoral role. The interim pastor will serve as head of staff and this person can work with Pastor Ben to share responsibilities just as Kirk and Ben do now.

Q. Can our interim become our new permanent senior pastor?

A. No, it is specifically their job to help with the transition. Knowing it is not a permanent role allows them to make harder decisions and ask harder questions without as much worrying about long lasting hard feelings because they will be moving on.

Q. Is it true we can’t see or interact with Pastor Kirk after he retires?

A. Aside from social interaction (see below), the John Knox Presbytery’s policy is pretty standard around the country. It requires the outgoing pastor to stay out of the life and ministry of the congregation for a minimum of 2 years. This includes officiating at baptisms, funerals, weddings and more. It remains important that we create and honor the separation and pray for grace to accept the boundaries.

Q. Can Pastor Kirk do funerals or weddings, etc. if it’s not at FPC?

A. No, regardless of the location, we need to honor the spirit and intention of the 2-year separation. This also helps with bias and personal relationships (a standard “no” to all requests is the easiest for the retiring pastor). Similarly, Kirk should not perform wedding/funerals/etc. jointly with the current pastor or another pastor.

Q. What about Faith (Kirk’s wife)?

A. The Presbytery has no jurisdiction over the family members of a departing pastor who were not church employees or on the staff. Faith is free to do as she would like but it’s assumed and encouraged that a spouse would normally also be a part of the separation. It just makes things easier for both sides. The expectation is both Kirk and Faith will find a different place to worship together. Member comment: “I would say the kind thing, the Godly thing, if we are reaching out to or connecting with Faith, is that we not bring up church stuff with her or try to connect with Kirk through her, because that would put her in a tough spot. We should not do it."

Q: What about Kirk’s dad? He has worshipped at FPC in the past and feels a connection to the church.

A: The Presbytery has no jurisdiction over the family members of a departing pastor who were not church employees or on the staff. Kirk’s dad may continue to attend FPC as he did in the past.

Q. What are the rules for socializing outside of the church with Pastor Kirk and Faith?

A. Keeping personal friendships is permissible but may present a challenge when it comes to honoring the spirit of the reasoning behind the separation. If FPC members do socialize with Kirk or Faith, they should avoid discussing what’s happening at FPC and focus on other “friend” topics. When dealing with family (like Faith) it is important that we honor the boundaries and not put them in a tough spot by pushing the boundaries. Chaz acknowledged that “certainly keeping personal friendships is acceptable. You can't just no longer be friends with somebody. You can't just write them off."

Q. Can Pastor Kirk attend weddings, funerals, etc. as a guest?

A. Pastor Kirk should still honor the separation and not attend but could send a gift or card.

Q. What about Pastor Norm’s funeral?

A. The answer is still no. It doesn’t matter how close Pastor Kirk is with someone. There will be difficult scenarios but the rules are in place for a reason. Kirk is encouraged to discuss the policy with some of those closest to him before he retires, to avoid disappointment later.

Q. What about relationships that predate Pastor Kirk’s time with FPC?

A. The separation and boundaries still apply. It’s ok to get together for personal connection reasons but it’s important to keep and respect the intentions of the separation and for Kirk to not engage in ministry to his former flock.

Q: What will happen if someone from FPC calls Pastor Kirk and asks him to perform in some kind of pastoral role before the two years are up?

A: Pastor Kirk will graciously decline, explaining that he can’t because of the Presbytery’s policy. If the caller takes exception to this, Kirk will refer that person to the Clerk of Session, the Personnel Elder, or to the Presbytery at 1-800-424-7935.

Q: The policy seems harsh. Why is it so restrictive?

A: Because it allows the next pastor who is coming in to get their feet on the ground, to get some traction, and to get going. We don’t want the new leader of the church to feel that they need to keep looking over their shoulder because Kirk is still there. If an incoming pastor sees the outgoing pastor in the congregation, it could make them anxious and impede their integration into the life of the church. Also, if the outgoing pastor hangs around, it makes it difficult for the congregation to break ties with the outgoing pastor and connect with the new pastor. It puts the new pastor in a difficult position, when we want them to be successful and develop relationships with the members.

Q. During the transitions, who would do funerals, weddings, etc.?  
A. Usually these would fall first to the interim but the families, couples, etc. could ask for our Associate Pastor (Pastor Ben) to take the lead.

Q. On average, how long would an interim be in place and is there a minimum?

A. Generally an interim is in place for about a year. But this is dependent on how things are going with the process within the church as they prepare for the future

Q: What’s the process to find a new pastor?

Q: The church contacts the Presbytery’s Committee on Ministry to request permission to set up a PNC – Pastor Nominating Committee. This will ordinarily happen 3-6 months into the interim pastor’s term. The PNC team members are nominated by the FPC Nominating Committee and voted on in a congregational meeting. The PNC works with the Presbytery to find and interview candidates. Once the PNC has a candidate they’d like to recommend, the congregation meets and votes to extend the call to hire the new pastor.

Q. Is there a supply of available permanent pastors out there?

A. Pastors seem to be sticking with their current congregations as many didn’t want to leave their flocks during the pandemic, but the dynamic is starting to change. However, in addition, the number of people going through seminary is also lower than it has been in the past. Not to be discouraged – there are pastors out there who would be good candidates.

Q. We want to make sure the interim is paid fairly. How do we decide how much to pay? Do they get the same salary that Pastor Kirk had?

A. The suggestion is that congregations should set a budget range at around 90% of the exiting pastor’s salary. While this might seem high, if you want to get a quality person, you’ll need to be prepared to pay for that. Recommend that we keep Kirk’s salary amount in 2022 budget.