

GUIDE FOR HOLY CLOSURE



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GUIDE FOR HOLY CLOSURE

The Path Forward

If you are reading this manual, you may be wondering whether it is time for your congregation to conclude its local ministry. You may be feeling fear, grief, or a sense of failure. You may even feel relief at being able to address what has been on your mind but unspoken.

Both the biblical witness and the Church's existence through the ages remind us that God is with us through times of upheaval. We know that God accompanies us through fear and death. And we know that with God death is never an end but a time when God brings forth new life and new possibilities. We see this time and again in the Church and in individuals' lives.

This resource is intended to help your congregation consider its ministry and whether it may—or may not be—time to close. Discerning the future God has before us involves prayer, intentional conversation, and honest reflection with the entire congregation. It also requires conversation with the Office of the Bishop and other local ministry leaders. This time of discernment may lead to unexpected paths forward or it may lead to a holy closure (see Options for a Waning Congregation in the appendix). Keep in mind that the closure of a congregation is not a failure. God has brought forth faithful ministry through your congregation for many years. Drawing a local ministry to an end has the potential to be a faithful act. It can steward the resources and gifts of one community of disciples for ministry in new ways with new disciples. Your congregation's final decisions and gifts can continue to support and further God's mission.

“If you but trust in God to guide you with gentle hand through all your ways, you'll find that God is there beside you when crosses come in trying days. Trust then in God's unchanging love; build on the rock that will not move.”

**If You But Trust in God to Guide You
ELW #679, stanza 1**

God's Unchanging Love

The Church was born out of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of God's Spirit. It was sent forth throughout the world to extend God's grace and mercy through Christ to all people. God's mission has been carried on through the ministry of the Church over centuries. Local communities of disciples, however, have gathered and been dispersed time and again. The communities of believers in the book of Acts no longer exist, but their legacy lives on in congregations around the world today. The kingdom of God is forever, but local communities of faith, like other organisms, are born, grow, mature, and eventually die in God's keeping. This is normal.

The work of God's kingdom will continue with or without us. Any congregation should continually be asking these questions:

- How are we participating in God's kingdom work?
- How are we growing in Christ and bearing fruit as a congregation and individually?
- How are we following the call to extend Christ's abundant love and mercy to others?
How are we inviting them into God's life with us?

If a congregation is clinging to survival for its own sake and not for the sake of Christ's mission, then something is amiss. "Is the congregation sustainable?" is not as important as

"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

John 12:24

the question "How are we living out Jesus' ministry through Word and Sacrament, serving others, and discipling new and existing believers?" Small congregations can accomplish fruitful ministry.

We claim that our God is a God of new life, of hope, of possibility. God's faithfulness to us through Christ allows us to examine whether our most faithful next step is to continue doing what we are doing, to change what we are

doing, or to plant the seeds of who we have been, trusting God to bring forth something new. If a seed is planted, it can bring forth new growth and new fruit. The closing of a congregation can also bring forth new life and new fruit when the seeds are planted. When a congregation takes time to plan and steward the gifts and resources it has been given throughout its life, the closing of a congregation is a faithful and life-giving decision.

Fears and Losses

It takes people and financial means to carry out fruitful ministry in our time and culture. The scarcity of one or both can paralyze or cause despair. But planning will be crucial - whether local ministry continues or comes to an end. Discernment about whether, when, or how to conclude your congregation's ministry should not be rushed. There should be time spent together in prayer, study, and conversation. Plan ways for listening to God, listening to one another, and even listening to the neighbors of your church building. Discernment takes time.

“The Lord our restless hearts is holding, in peace and quietness content. We rest in God’s good will unfolding, what wisdom from on high has sent. God, who has chosen us by grace, knows very well the fears we face.”

**If You But Trust in God to Guide You
ELW #679, stanza 3**

It may also be difficult. Each one of us comes to these conversations with our own history, memories, hopes, and fears. Nostalgia for “the good old days” lives within us. Our great-grandparents may be buried in the church cemetery. We may have fond memories of family baptisms, marriages, candlelit Christmas services, and jubilant Easter singing. Even when we know rationally that none of those things will ever happen again in that same way in our church building, ending a congregational ministry and leaving a church building involves grief—and with grief comes expressions of denial, anger, or depression. Conversation about even the possibility of closing will arouse all these feelings. Be prepared for them; accept them in yourself and others but strive to have honest and grace-filled conversation with one another.

Because these are difficult and emotionally laden conversations, it may be tempting to avoid them until it is too late. People may be too scared or too worn out to do this work of corporate discernment. Financial and material resources may also be

“What gain is there in anxious weeping, in helpless anger and distress? If you are in your Savior’s keeping, in sorrow will he hove you less? For Christ who took for you a cross will bring you safe through every loss.”

**If You But Trust in God to Guide You
ELW #679, stanza 3**

scarce. Therefore, it is prudent to be proactive and start this conversation before a congregation is stuck. Being proactive now allows time to assess various paths forward. It also allows for more faithful stewardship of resources - both people and material. Any option for moving forward which could include merger, relocation, or closure will involve significant legal and constitutional work. It will take time, people, and money. Review your constitution to know what is required for congregational meetings and a quorum. Locate the title to property, which may involve time and cost. Plan now instead of panicking later.

Serving Faithfully

The starting point for discernment of viability and future ministry should always begin with the prayers of the community, both individually and corporately. Synod staff can help you craft a plan for intentional prayer during this time.

Leadership and the wider congregation should be invited into conversation concerning the mission of the congregation according to its constitution (chapter 4). Take intentional time to discuss:

- How is this congregation living out its stated mission?
- What barriers exist that hinder the fulfillment of its mission? What might it take to overcome these barriers?
- Is the congregation depleting its capital assets to pay for current expenses?
- Is the congregation able to maintain its property and have sufficient reserves for longer-term property needs?
- Does the congregation have enough members to serve on council or to hold legal congregation meetings?

Closing a congregation does not mean the impact of a congregation's ministry has to end though. Closing may be a more effective way of extending and expanding a congregation's ministry. Just as individuals create legacy plans, so too, a congregation nearing the end of its life cycle can plan how to use its resources to continue serving God and neighbor in faithful witness. Doing so also honors the faithful gifts of those who came before us and gave generously for sake of the gospel's proclamation. For example, a congregation that closes can be the beginning of something greater when its assets support the planting of new ministries that proclaim the good news and build up the body of Christ.

What kind of legacy does your congregation wish to leave? Use the following questions and issues for further discernment:

- How might the congregation's resources be used to plant a new congregation or support mission and outreach to new and not-yet Christians?
- How might the church building and grounds be used in new ways to serve the local community? (For example, as a senior center, a school, a playground, a worship center for another faith community...)
- Consider the congregation's current and past commitments, values, priorities, and energy. These might give a clue as to how existing resources could be invested in the mission of the wider church (for example, a scholarship fund or support for a specific ministry like outdoor ministry, campus ministry, social services).
- Might congregational furnishings and other property be sold, gifted, or re-purposed so that ministry is strengthened in some other way in some other place?
- Identify objects and documents that have real historical value. Take steps to preserve and archive these so that others can learn from them.
- Find ways to tell, share, celebrate and preserve the congregation's story. This is also a legacy for the wider church.

**“Sing, pray, and keep God’s ways unswerving, offer your service faithfully.
Trust in heaven’s word; though undeserving, you’ll find this promise true to be.
This is our confidence indeed: God never fails in time of need.”**

**If You But Trust in God to Guide You
ELW #679, stanza 4**

There are many steps in the dissolution of a congregation’s legal existence. Some are legal, some are financial, and some are operational. These steps must be done in accordance with both the constitution of the congregation and the laws governing incorporated organizations in Illinois. These steps will include things such as:

- Congregational meetings
- Care of the congregation’s disciples and the next part of their faith journey
- Care of the pastor (if applicable)

- Final celebrations of past ministry and a closing worship service.
- Care and disbursement of the congregation's assets to carry on the work of the gospel in new ways and places
- Appointment of trustees to carry out the dissolution of the congregation

The appendix in this document includes

- “The Process of Closing a Congregation,” which outlines specific steps in closing a congregation in the Central/Southern Illinois Synod;
- “A Legacy Planning Guide,” to help think through the care of people and assets after a decision to close has been made;
- a guide to archiving; and
- a reference for planning a concluding worship service.

Should the guiding of the Spirit lead to an end of your congregation's local ministry, the synod office has a template for a congregational resolution to dissolve the congregation.

The bishop and staff of the Central/Southern Illinois Synod want you to know that your congregation's ministry matters to your community and to God and they journey with you in your time of discernment and decision-making. Do not hesitate to reach out for assistance.

“O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through joys and perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

(Adapted from the Service of Evening Prayer, Evangelical Lutheran Worship)

APPENDIX

Options for Transitioning a Waning Congregation

When a congregation realizes that its current ministry is not fully meeting its call to live out Christ's mission, the council and congregation prayerfully discern their next faithful step in consultation with synod staff. Every congregation's context is different; below are options congregations may consider.

Sharing a Pastor: Typically, the primary goal in this arrangement of two (or more) congregations is to provide for continued pastoral service at a reduced cost to the congregations. The congregations function independently of each other. This option fuels a survival anxiety since it does not engage questions of area-wide mission strategy. This option tends to be less attractive to prospective pastors because of the lack of mission.

Shared Ministry: The goal in this arrangement is to build up ministry; congregations are committed to the wellbeing of one another and a common, coordinated ministry. This is most fully lived out through a parish model, where a joint council is formed by two or more congregations and the congregations formally commit to strengthening one another's ministry and call rostered ministers to serve the entire parish.

Consolidation: Two or more congregations "go out of business" to become a new congregation with a new name. Experience shows that for successful consolidation to occur, it is best that the newly formed congregation move to a new location. The new congregation will need to go through a call process.

Merger: One congregation gives up its separate identity ("goes out of business") and unites its assets, including members, with an already existing congregation. There is no change in the call of the rostered ministers at the "receiving" congregation; the call of the pastor of the merging congregation ends once the merger occurs.

Restart: A congregation stops worshipping for six months while actively and intentionally exploring its mission context (i.e. neighborhood). Bible study and fellowship occur at a time other than Sunday mornings. After discerning and developing a new mission plan that includes a purpose statement, guiding principles, missional direction, and action plans, a new name is chosen, allowing the congregation to claim a new identity.

Parallel Development: If it is determined that there is strong potential for a mission development serving a different population in the same area as the initial congregation, a mission developer may be called to develop the new ministry. Three-quarters of the developer's time would be focused on the new development, one-quarter time to the existing congregation.

Relocation: A congregation sells its current site and begins to worship at an alternative site.

Becoming a Mobile Church: A congregation sells its current site and becomes a church without its own permanent property. Sunday worship space is secured perhaps at another congregation, nursing home, rental building, etc. All other ministry gatherings, meetings, Bible studies, etc. are held in public spaces.

Closure: This option acknowledges that congregations follow a natural cycle of birth, life, and death. Closure involves legal, practical, and emotional processes and financial costs. This may be done with an integrity and faithfulness that leaves a legacy for future ministry.

The Process of Closing a Congregation

The decision to be made by a congregation is ultimately its answer to the question, “What does God desire of us at this time?” Once a determination is made that this congregation has completed its service to God as an independent congregation in this place, the congregation enters a time of discernment about how best to steward the remaining resources of the congregation, with the hope of leaving a legacy and providing new life and Christian witness from this closing.

When closing a congregation, there are two important points always to keep in mind:

1. Congregational leaders must communicate clearly and often with congregation members, being completely transparent about the issues to be decided and the meetings to make these decisions.
2. Thorough minutes must be kept of all council and congregational discussions and actions.

In order for the congregation to dissolve, a written resolution to dissolve must be passed by the congregation at a legally called congregational meeting. This resolution may serve as the congregation’s Articles of Dissolution.

Property

1. Inventory the contents of the building(s).
2. Arrange to secure the building(s) until ownership is transferred. Security includes maintaining fire and liability insurance, keeping the buildings securely locked, designating someone to regularly check the building, and maintaining needed utilities.
3. Discontinue utility services no longer needed.
4. Arrange for the exterior of the property to be maintained (lawn mowing, weed control and snow removal).
5. Decide what to do with the building(s) and its contents. The staff of the Central/Southern Illinois Synod stands ready to assist you with these decisions; at the same time, it is best that ownership of the building and contents be transferred (sold) to third parties before the remaining congregational funds go to the synod for ongoing stewardship of the gospel.

Records

1. Gather all congregational records, including the parish register, all minutes of meetings of the congregation council and of the congregation, and all financial records.
2. Appraise which records are required for the formal closing of the congregation and which need to be archived.
3. Plan for the proper disposal of records no longer needed.
4. Visual materials such as photographs, videotapes, and films also provide a record of the congregation. Determination will need to be made of which visual materials are to be retained and how to best archive them.
5. Church records relative to baptisms, weddings, and funerals are turned over to the synod office when the congregation dissolves.

Financial

1. Catalog all financial accounts.
2. Arrange for all outstanding bills to be paid promptly until closing is finalized.
3. Finalize any remaining payments to the pastor and send required communications to the ELCA Portico Benefit Services.
4. A congregation may disperse funds to “like” organizations, as defined by the Internal Revenue Service. When the congregation formally disbands, all remaining assets and funds are transferred to the synod. In the Central/Southern Illinois Synod, we seek to honor the intent of the saints who built and supported the mission and ministry of their congregation over the life of the congregation by having their contributions still be used to proclaim the gospel and to build up the body of Christ. Funds that the Central/Southern Illinois Synod receives from disbanded congregations go into a restricted fund that is used to assist revitalizing congregations and new mission starts.

Dissolving a congregation requires filing official papers with the appropriate governmental office. In Illinois, dissolution becomes effective by filing Articles of Dissolution with the Secretary of State.

Articles of dissolution must satisfy the following requirements:

1. Be signed by the congregation's President or Vice President and the congregation's Secretary or Assistant Secretary.
2. Contain the following information:
 - a. the corporate name of the congregation;
 - b. the date dissolution was authorized by the voting members of the congregation;
 - c. a mailing address for the mailing of documents relating to any lawsuits against the congregation that may be served on the Secretary of State after the congregation's dissolution; and
 - d. a statement that the dissolution was authorized by the voting members, at a legally called congregational meeting.
3. Be filed, with the applicable fee, with the Secretary of State, by presenting two exact copies, one of which must be the original.

The congregation must also cancel the congregation's Employer Identification Number (EIN).

Go to the IRS webpage at this link: <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/termination-of-an-exempt-organization#orgs-not-required> Follow the instructions for organizations not required to file an annual return or notice.

The grace of God the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of God the Holy Spirit be with you all through this process. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact me:

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Legacy Planning Guide

When there has been a decision to move toward concluding local ministry through merger or closure, attention needs to be given to ending well. Special care should be given to tending to the community as a whole, individual members, and the physical and financial assets.

The final actions of a congregation determine what kind of legacy it leaves and how even in closing the community witnesses to the power of the crucified and risen Christ.

Care of the community

The resolution to dissolve the congregation will indicate a date when worship and congregational activities will cease. While some leaders of the congregation will need to tend to physical assets, also consider who will attend to community life. While planning a final worship service is most significant, consider other ways to celebrate and give thanks for the congregation's ministry through the years. Other worship services or programs may include a slide show or videos, interviews with community agencies and partners about how the congregation's ministry has impacted them, and correspondence from former pastors or church members. God was touching many lives through your congregation's ministry. Find ways to lift that up and give thanks as well as recognizing the loss many will feel. You may consider forming a prayer team that regularly prays for the congregation and disciples by name through the closing time. Resources for a final worship service are included in this material on page 19.

Care of individuals

While the congregation may be concluding its ministry, the faith and lives of disciples will continue. All effort should be made to entrust members to the care of a new congregation so they may continue their faithful discipleship. You should plan to contact all members to help them decide where they would like to transfer their membership and assist them in contacting the receiving congregation to follow their new member procedures. Consider how you will contact members and who will keep records. The membership records of any member who does not indicate their intention to transfer into an alternate congregation should go to your synod along with all pastoral records. While intents to transfer membership can be made, please remember that a congregational meeting to dissolve the congregation will require a quorum; it will be important for people to remain members until after that meeting.

Pastoral care emergencies will continue through the transition and the synod staff will help you identify ministers to serve in that way.

Care of the pastor

If a pastor is under call with the congregation, the pastor should be in conversation with synod staff about seeking a new call. It may be necessary for the pastor to accept a new call before the final worship service. It is also prudent to consider the stewardship and best use of financial assets in the remaining months, as the closing and disposal of assets will incur financial costs. The congregation council and pastor will need to have honest, forthright, and caring conversation about the financial situation. If a pastor does not have a subsequent call before the congregation dissolves, the congregation should consider an appropriate severance.

Care of assets

There are both missional and legal aspects to considering the disposal of assets.

Care should always be taken to preserve the original intention of the church founders. The physical and financial property of a congregation exists because of faithful saints who desired to advance the kingdom of God.

Determining how to direct the church property can be an enormous project and yet a joyful opportunity to share God's generosity, seeding new ministry and continuing the congregation's legacy in other places. Do not allow the assets to be frittered away. The church's assets were given to glorify God and further ministry.

In the Central/Southern Illinois Synod, assets received from congregations concluding their local ministry are directed to a fund supporting new mission starts on our synod territory unless otherwise specified. You may want to consider how residual assets may be allocated, and any specifications may be included in the resolution for dissolution. For example:

- 10 percent (tithe) to ELCA Mission Support through the Central/Southern Illinois Synod.
- 50 percent supporting new ministry development in the synod. (This may include support of new mission congregations, transforming ministries, or other strategic mission initiatives.)

- 10 percent supporting ELCA domestic and global ministry initiatives. (This may include ELCA World Hunger, Missionary Support, Lutheran Disaster Response, etc.)
- 20 percent supporting ministry partners and other strategic ministries. (This may include Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, Lutheran Campus Ministry of Illinois, Lutheran Outdoor Ministries Center)
- 10 percent supporting community-based programs that have been traditionally networked with the congregation.

Structuring your congregation's gifts to form "named gifts or endowments" is always an option. By not placing narrow restrictions on your allocations, however, recipients can be nimble and innovative in finding effective ways to invest your gifts for ministry.

Synod staff can help establish the mechanisms for sharing your legacy and may make suggestions on how your resources might most effectively support on-going ministry. Mr. Tim Urness, ELCA Regional Gift Planner for our synod, is also available to consult with congregations about distributing final assets. He may be reached at tim.urness@elca.org; 331-444-3120; or 800-638-3522.

About disposal of assets of non-profit organizations

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has strict guidelines for the disposing of non-profit assets. According to the IRS:

Assets of a [non-profit] organization must be permanently dedicated to an exempt purpose. This means that should an organization dissolve, its assets must be distributed for an exempt purpose described in this chapter or to the federal government or to a state or local government for a public purpose. If the assets could be distributed to members or private individuals or for any other purpose, the organizational test is not met. (IRS section 501 (c)(3), chapter 3)

In other words, once something is given to a congregation, it belongs solely to the congregation and the congregation's ministry. If a church decides to dissolve, it is required to dispose of the remaining assets by transferring them to other exempt organizations or governmental agencies, as stated above. The congregation cannot open the door and allow a free-for-all. Nor can an individual come back and say, "I bought that for the church, so I want it back."

As you consider the disposal of assets, be aware of the significance of material things. It is normal for people to have powerful emotional attachments to such things as pews, stained glass, cemeteries, communion ware, and even silverware and furniture. This attachment is not necessarily idolatry of those things. Everything in a church develops layers of meaning over time. Every object can accumulate layers of stories and powerful emotional resonance. Find ways to respect and honor the significance of these objects, even – and especially – as you are letting go. Find ways to remind people that all these things served to glorify God and carry out the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ to the world.

Archive Recommendations

1. Copies of the articles of incorporation, constitutions and by-laws and amendments of such documents, of the congregation and its organizations.
2. The list of charter members and all additions, transfers and releases of members. For years, congregations kept this record in a large, hardbound red, multi-page "Parish Register". Congregations now typically keep these records electronically. This parish register has a record of the ministerial acts, especially for baptisms, confirmations, marriages, burials, etc.
3. The minutes of the meetings of the congregation and Congregation Council. The last few years would be sufficient. If there are historic decisions made, and you would like a record of those decisions kept for sentimental or legacy purposes, by all means archive those minutes.
4. The non-current treasurers' records, such as annual reports and audits, going back five years.
5. Copies of the deeds and descriptions of the church properties, titles, leases, surveys, etc.
6. Contracts for the construction of congregational buildings, and facilities, as well as contracts negotiated for special services.
7. Mortgages even after they have been retired.
8. Photographs and histories of the congregation's buildings, pastors, organizations, activities, and events - anything that you think ought to be preserved for recalling the congregation's ministries, joys, and faithful life in Christ.

Service of Leave-Taking: Leaving a Church Building or Closing a Congregation

Leaving a church building or closing a congregation both are occasions that are filled with a mixture of emotions in varying degrees—grief and nostalgia about what has gone before, as well as anxiety and hopefulness about the future. A service at which a congregation may offer thanks for ministry in a given place can be an important way of acknowledging its history as well as the pain of separation from something that has been of value to people's spiritual lives.

Meanwhile, gathering with people who will continue on to another building together or who will join the ministry of other congregations is a reminder that God's mission continues and extends beyond our institutions. The resources provided here may replace or supplement elements of the service of Holy Communion.

Gathering

Address

Following the prayer of the day the presiding minister introduces the purpose of the service in these or similar words.

Today we gather [for the last time] in this place as the people of *[name of congregation]*. We give thanks for the ministry that has happened in this building/congregation, and for the people who have been fed and nurtured in the Christian faith here. Even as we mark the end of an era in one place, we acknowledge how we all are participants in God's mission that continues beyond this day and these walls.

Former pastors and other leaders of the congregation or its related institutions may offer brief remarks or greetings at this time.

Word

Thanksgiving for the Means of Grace

Following the sermon and the hymn of the day, the presiding minister addresses the congregation in these or similar words.

At the dedication of a church building, it is customary to ask God's blessing on the places of the word and sacraments. Today we return to these symbols of God's grace in our lives.

Because proclaiming the word and celebrating the sacraments are the heart of a congregation's ministry, we give thanks for the ways that God has nurtured this congregation throughout the years and has led us to serve others in Christ's name.

The presiding minister may go to each of the three primary areas where the means of grace are offered in worship the places of the word, of baptism, and of the sacramental meal. When the space around each of these centers is large enough to accommodate all worshipers who are present, they may be invited to gather in each of those respective places.

At the place of the word

Let us pray.

O God, your mighty word at the dawn of creation
breathed life into the earth and all of its inhabitants.
By the gift of your incarnate Word in Jesus,
you brought good news of life and salvation to all humankind.
Through your word proclaimed in worship here,
this congregation has been challenged and healed.
Let your voice, which has sounded in this place,
echo in our lives as we proclaim your message of peace
into the places you will send us;
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

At the place of baptism

O God, through the flood in the time of Noah,
and through the waters of the Red Sea,
you saved your people of old.
Through the waters of baptism in this place,
your people have been born to new life
and have been commissioned for service in Christ's name.
May all the baptized continue to give witness
to your saving grace throughout the world;
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

At the place of the meal

O God, through manna on a wilderness journey
and through loaves of bread multiplied on a hillside,
you fed people who needed sustenance for their bodies and souls.
May all who have been nourished here with the body and blood of Christ
give themselves away as food for the hungry.
May all who have feasted here welcome others to the banquet of salvation;
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Prayers of intercession are prepared locally for the occasion and include petitions for the church, those in need, and all of God's creation.

One or more of the following petitions may be included in the prayers of intercession.

For the one holy catholic and apostolic church in all times and places,
of which this congregation and its building have been a part,
we give our thanks and praise.

For the men and women who founded this congregation,
who made personal sacrifices in order for it to grow and flourish,
and who used their talents and skills in building up a community of faith,
we give our thanks and praise.

For this congregation's ministries throughout its life,
its gatherings for praise and prayer,
its faithful use of the means of grace,
and its study of the scriptures,
we give our thanks and praise.

For the work of mission this congregation has supported

[here specific names of global mission and relief agencies may be mentioned],

for our local partners of ministry

[here names of area ecumenical organizations and local mission efforts may be mentioned],

and for all the lives that have been affected by God's work through us.

For this building that has sheltered *[name of congregation]* for *[number of]* years,

that the memory of this place will continue to inspire devotion to the God who makes all things possible.

For all who hold special attachments to this congregation *[and to this building]*,
for those who have been baptized, nurtured in faith, confirmed, or married in this place;
that the Holy Spirit's gifts continue to sustain them
even as this congregation's outward expression
[takes on a new form / comes to a conclusion].

For the members of this congregation,
who will continue gathering as a people of God in *[a new place / other communities of faith]*,
that today will mark not only the end of an era
but also the beginning of new opportunities for worship and service.

For a congregation that is merging

For *[name/s of other congregation/s]*,
with which members of *[name of this congregation]* are joining,
that various gifts for ministry may be offered and shared,
and that renewal in life and mission may flourish.

For the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the *[name of synod]*, its present and
past bishops, staff, and other leaders
who have helped this congregation throughout the years,
especially as they have led us to be faithful in our proclamation of the gospel.

For all who have been a part of the ministry of this congregation throughout its life,
those who have remained constant in the face of challenges,
those who have moved away,
and all who have died and now rest in you, we give you thanks,
rejoicing that we are joined together in one eternal communion.

Meal

Prayer after Communion

Gracious God, at your table you strengthen us for service
wherever you will send us.

As we leave this place that has been a home for worship and mission,

help us to gather in our new setting / other settings
 that will provide further opportunities for our life and ministry.
 Welcome us forever into your embrace,
 until that day when all your people throughout the world
 worship together around the throne of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

Sending

Congregational Records and Assets

When a congregation is closing, A representative of the closing congregation speaks the following or similar words while handing over official congregational records.

In remembrance and with thanksgiving, we hand over the documented history and official records that symbolize the joys and sorrows of the people of God in this place. Receive and preserve them so that the ministry of this congregation may be remembered.

Information about the transfer of congregational assets may be conveyed at this time.

Declaration on Leave-Taking

The presiding minister addresses the assembly. When present, a synod bishop or another synod representative may offer the declaration.

At the leaving of a building

With thanks to God for the work accomplished in this place,
 I declare this building to be vacated for the purposes of *[name of congregation]*,
 in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
 May the witness of the people
 who have ministered here in the name of Jesus Christ
 continue to live on as they leave these walls and begin life in a new place.
Amen.

At the closing of a congregation

With thanks to God for the work accomplished in this place,
 I declare this congregation, *[name of congregation]*, to be closed
 in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
 May the witness of the people

who have ministered in the name of Jesus Christ through *[name of congregation]*
 be undiminished and continue as they leave this place.
Amen.

Blessing

The presiding minister proclaims God's blessing in these or similar words.

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,
 in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him
 who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.
 Almighty God, Father, ☩ Son, and Holy Spirit,
 bless you now and forever.
Amen.

Dismissal

The assisting minister sends the assembly into mission.

Let us go forth in peace,
 in the name of Christ. **Amen.**

Procession

A hymn, psalm, or instrumental music may accompany the assembly as it processes out of the worship space.

Notes on the Service

Ordinarily the setting for this service is in a building that a congregation is vacating. Whenever an alternative location needs to be arranged (because of serious damage to a structure, for example) this service may be adapted and altered as necessary.

A pastor of the congregation may serve as the presiding minister for this occasion. The synod bishop or another synod representative, if present, may preside at the service or at the sending.

Choices of wording that are appropriate for either the leaving of a church building or the closing of a congregation are provided in italics. Worship leaders will need to select the wording that is appropriate to the given situation or prepare similar wording suitable to the context.

The presentation of congregational records and assets is normally used only at the closing of a congregation, although the transferring of assets may be appropriate if a congregation is moving to a new building and handing the existing building over to another congregation.

If the congregation is closing, one or more volumes of congregational records may be brought by the secretary, the president, the pastor, or another congregational representative and handed to a leader of another congregation with which the congregation is being merged, or to a person having oversight of regional church archives.

If the congregation is selling property or handing over assets to another congregation, a synod, or other organizations, information about that transfer may be conveyed at this time. Representatives of organizations receiving various assets may come forward to have them presented at this time (for example, the symbolic handing over of keys to a building or the presentation of an official document or a bank check).

If it is desired, some worship appointments that can easily be carried in procession at the conclusion of the service, such as a cross, candles, a Bible or lectionary book, communion vessels, banners, and other items, may lead the congregation as they take leave of the building.

If the congregation will be taking the items a short distance to a place that it will occupy next (either to a new building or to the facility of another congregation with which it is merging) the procession may continue directly into the other building. If the congregation is closing and is giving all its property to other entities, including worship appointments, these items may be carried in procession by people who are assuming custody of them, such as representatives of another congregation, a regional church archives center, or an appropriate museum. Instructions about how the items are to be handled and where they are to be placed at the conclusion of the procession should be provided to participants ahead of time. Information about where the items are going should also be conveyed to the assembly.

Probers

The probers for the Sunday on which the service of leave-taking occurs are normally used. When the service occurs at a time apart from the primary service/s of the congregation, or on a Sunday for which the color is green, probers may be selected from those listed here.

Prayer of the Day

O God, you have promised through your Son to be with your church forever. We give you thanks for those who founded this community of believers and for the signs of your presence in this congregation throughout its life. As this congregation name concludes its time together [in this place], grant that we may ever follow in the way, the truth, and the life, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

Gospel Acclamation

Alleluia. We have a build- | ing from God,
a house not made with hands, eternal | in the heavens. *Alleluia.* (2 Cor. 5:1)

Readings and Psalms

2 Samuel 7:18-29 The house of Israel

Isaiah 43:1-7 The LORD is with Israel

Isaiah 66:1-2 Heaven is the throne and earth is the footstool of God

Jeremiah 29:1-7 Israel plants gardens in Babylon

Psalms 46 The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold. (Ps. 46:7)

Psalms 90:12-17 So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.
(Ps. 90:12)

Psalms 103:1-8, 22 LORD, you are full of compassion and mercy. (Ps. 103:8)

Psalms 122 I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD." (Ps. 122:1)

Psalms 136:1-4, 23-26 God's mercy endures forever. (Ps. 136:1)

Acts 17:22-31 God does not live in human shrines

Ephesians 2:11-22 No longer strangers and aliens, but members of God's household

1 Peter 2:4-10 A living stone, chosen and precious

Revelation 21:1-4, 22-27 The temple is the Lamb

Matthew 6:25-34 Do not worry about tomorrow

Matthew 16:13-20 On this rock I will build my church

Mark 10:23-31 How hard it is for the wealthy to enter God's kingdom

Luke 9:57-62 Jesus says, "Follow me"

John 15:1-11 Christ the vine

Hymns

308 O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright!

429 In Our Day of Thanksgiving

441 Oh, Happy Day When We Shall Stand

503-505 A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

524 What Is This Place
526 God Is Here!
579 Lord, You Give the Great Commission
596, 597 My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less
627 O Day Full of Grace
632 O God, Our Help in Ages Past
633 We've Come This Far by Faith
639 When We Are Living
645 Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation
647 Glorious Things of You Are Spoken
652 Built on a Rock
654 The Church's One Foundation
656 Blest Be the Tie That Binds
729 The Church of Christ, in Every Age
839, 840 Now Thank We All Our God
858, 859 Praise to the Lord, the Almighty

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