



NAVIGATING PASTORAL TRANSITIONS

A FIELD GUIDE SERIES FOR CONGREGATIONS AND PASTORS

ENDING WELL



FAITHFUL GOODBYES.
GRATEFUL HEARTS.
GOD'S FUTURE.

A FIELD GUIDE



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Introduction

Every Ministry Has an Ending

Every ministry begins with hope.

A pastor arrives carrying gifts, experience, questions, and a sense of call. A congregation receives that pastor with expectations of its own. Over time, lives become woven together. Sermons are preached. Children are baptized. Saints are buried. Decisions are made. Conflicts are navigated. Meals are shared. People sit together in hospital rooms and around kitchen tables. Some dreams become ministries. Others never quite take shape.

Gradually, pastor and congregation create a story neither could have written alone.

And then, one day, that ministry ends.

Some endings have been anticipated for years: a pastor retires after a long and beloved ministry. Others arrive unexpectedly through another call or a change in circumstance. At times, pastor and congregation simply recognize that a season has reached its natural conclusion.

Whatever the circumstances, an announcement changes the congregation almost immediately.

People begin asking what will happen next. Who will preach? Who will visit? How long will the transition take? When will we begin looking for another pastor?

Those questions matter. In time, they will need answers.

But they are not the first questions. Before a congregation can faithfully welcome what comes next, it must attend to what is ending now.

Ending well is holy work.

It means giving thanks for what has been shared without pretending that everything was perfect. Every ministry contains moments of grace and moments of disappointment, accomplishments worth celebrating and hopes that remain unfinished. Faithful endings make room for the whole story.

Ending well also means making room for grief.

Pastoral relationships are unlike most other relationships. Pastors are invited into some of the most intimate moments of people's lives. They stand beside families at births and deaths, marriages and divorces, celebrations and crises. They carry stories that few others know. Congregations, in turn, become part of a pastor's life and vocation. Years of ministry create affection, trust, memory, and sometimes wounds.

When those relationships change, people grieve.

Grief is not evidence that something has gone wrong; often it is evidence that something has mattered. Yet grieving is not the same as holding on.

Eventually, every healthy ending asks pastor and congregation to release one another.

That may be the hardest part.

A congregation can remain grateful for a pastor without continuing to depend upon that pastor. A pastor can continue to love a congregation without continuing to serve as its pastor. Relationships do not become meaningless because their form must change.

Healthy boundaries make that possible.

They are not punishments imposed upon people who care about one another. They are acts of love that allow a ministry to become what it now must become: a chapter of the congregation's story rather than an unfinished claim upon its future.

There is a spiritual discipline in such release.

Throughout Scripture, God's people repeatedly discover that faithfulness includes both receiving and relinquishing. People are called into places they did not expect and eventually called away from places they have come to love. Seasons begin. Seasons end. What remains constant is not any particular leader or circumstance, but the faithfulness of God.

That is the deeper confidence beneath this Field Guide.

The congregation existed before this pastor arrived. Christ was present then.

The congregation will continue after this pastor leaves. Christ will be present then.

The pastor's vocation did not begin with this congregation, nor does it end there.

Both can release one another because neither belongs ultimately to the other.

Both belong to Christ.

Ending well, then, is more than managing a pastoral departure. It is the spiritual work of gratitude, grief, truth-telling, release, and blessing.

There will be practical matters to address. Announcements must be made. Responsibilities must be transferred. Celebrations must be planned. Boundaries must be understood. A final Sunday will eventually arrive.

But beneath all those tasks lies something more important.

Pastor and congregation are learning how to say:

Thank you for what we have shared.

We will tell the truth about what this ministry has been.

We will grieve what we are losing.

We will release what we can no longer be for one another.

And we will entrust one another to God.

That is what it means to end well.

Not to erase the relationship.

Not to diminish what has mattered.

But to bless what has been, release what must be released, and make room for God to lead both pastor and congregation into what comes next.

Chapter One

Recognizing That an Ending Has Begun

There is a moment when a pastoral transition becomes real.

It may happen when a pastor tells the session of a decision to retire or accept another call, or when a letter is read to the congregation. People may have sensed for months that change was coming, but hearing the words aloud changes everything.

The ministry has not ended.

But the ending has begun.

From that moment forward, pastor and congregation live in an unusual space. They are still together, still worshiping, serving, meeting, caring, and carrying out the ordinary work of ministry. Yet everyone knows that the relationship is changing.

That knowledge changes the way people experience even familiar things.

A sermon may suddenly feel like one of the last sermons.

A committee meeting may prompt the realization that someone else will soon sit in the pastor's chair.

A hospital visit may carry an unspoken awareness that this pastor will not always be the one who comes.

Ordinary moments begin to acquire the weight of goodbye.

People respond to that realization differently.

Some become sad immediately. Others become anxious about the future. Some begin asking practical questions. Some want to organize a celebration. Some become unusually appreciative. Others grow distant because distancing makes goodbye easier.

A few may feel relief.

Most congregations contain all of these responses at once.

The pastor has responses of their own.

Leaving a congregation is not simply leaving a job. A pastor may feel excitement about retirement or another call while simultaneously grieving relationships that have become deeply important. There may be satisfaction about what has been accomplished and regret about what has not. There may be people the pastor finds especially difficult to leave and others from whom departure comes more easily.

Pastor and congregation therefore enter the ending together, but they do not experience it in the same way.

That is worth remembering.

Resist the Rush Toward What Comes Next

One of the first responses to a pastoral departure is often urgency.

What do we do now?

Who will lead us?

How quickly can we begin the search?

How long will we be without a pastor?

Anxiety naturally turns our attention toward the future. If we can make a plan quickly enough, perhaps the uncertainty will feel more manageable.

But an ending has work of its own.

When a congregation moves too quickly toward finding the next pastor, it can easily carry an unfinished relationship into the next one. Gratitude remains unexpressed. Grief goes unnamed. Disappointments are left unresolved. Expectations formed around one pastor quietly become expectations placed upon another.

The purpose of Ending Well is not to delay the future.

It is to become ready for it.

There will be time for preparing, remembering, listening, discerning, and eventually calling new leadership. Those movements matter. But they should not be used to escape the ending that is happening now.

For a little while, the most faithful question may not be,

What happens next?

It may be,

What does this ending ask of us now?

The Announcement Matters

How a congregation first learns of a pastor's departure shapes the beginning of the ending.

People deserve clarity.

Rumors, partial information, private conversations, and poorly timed announcements can create unnecessary anxiety and sometimes lasting hurt. People begin wondering who knew, who did not know, what has not been said, and whether there is more to the story.

A thoughtful announcement cannot remove the sadness or uncertainty of a departure, but it can create trust.

The pastor and appropriate congregational leaders should think carefully about who needs to be informed, in what order, and how the congregation will hear the news. Staff members should not discover a pastor is leaving through congregational gossip. Key leaders should not be placed in the position of pretending not to know something indefinitely. The congregation should hear the news clearly and directly rather than piecing it together through social media or hallway conversations.

The circumstances of a departure will shape what should be communicated. A retirement after many years will be announced differently from an unexpected call to another congregation. A planned conclusion of transitional ministry will differ from a resignation under difficult circumstances.

But whatever the circumstances, honesty and care matter.

People do not need to know everything, but they do need to know what is theirs to know—a distinction that matters throughout a pastoral transition.

Give People Time to Receive the News

An announcement is not the same as understanding.

The pastor may have lived with the decision for weeks or months before anyone else hears it. By the time the announcement is made, the pastor may already have prayed, struggled, talked with family, imagined the future, and begun privately grieving the departure.

The congregation is just beginning.

That difference in timing can create misunderstanding.

A pastor may be ready to talk enthusiastically about what comes next while members are still absorbing the fact that the pastor is leaving. Members may ask questions the pastor thought had already been settled. Some may respond emotionally. Others may seem strangely unaffected until weeks later.

People need time to catch up with news the pastor has already been living with.

The same is true within the congregation. Those who have known in advance may be further along emotionally than those who hear the news for the first time in worship.

Patience is part of ending well.

Not every reaction needs correction, every question an immediate answer, or every silence to be filled.

People may simply need time to realize that something they assumed would continue is coming to an end.

Do Not Write the Ending Too Quickly

Once a departure is announced, people often begin telling themselves what it means.

“It won’t be the same without her.”

“This may be exactly what the church needs.”

“We’ll never find another pastor like him.”

“Now maybe we can finally change.”

“The church is going to fall apart.”

“We’ll be fine.”

These statements reveal something important, but they are not necessarily descriptions of reality. They are often expressions of grief, hope, fear, affection, frustration, or uncertainty.

The story of a ministry should not be written in the first days after its ending is announced.

There is still time to listen.

There is still time to remember.

There is still time to say things that need to be said.

There is still time to discover what this shared ministry has meant.

And there is still ministry to do.

Ending well does not mean spending the final weeks or months staring backward. People will still become ill. Children will still need teachers. Worship will still be planned. The session will still make decisions. The congregation will still serve its neighbors. Christ’s ministry continues even while one pastoral relationship is drawing to a close.

The ending becomes part of the ministry rather than an interruption of it.

Let the Ending Be an Ending

There is a temptation during this period to soften the reality of departure.

“We’ll still see each other.”

“You can always call me.”

“I’ll come back for your wedding.”

“Nothing really has to change.”

Such assurances are usually offered out of affection. They make the separation seem less painful.

But they can also make the eventual separation more difficult.

Something really is changing.

The pastor will no longer be this congregation's pastor. The congregation will no longer be this pastor's congregation in the same way. The relationships that have developed may remain meaningful, but the pastoral relationship itself is approaching its conclusion.

There is no need to rush that conclusion, and no wisdom in pretending it is not happening. At this stage, the task is simply to recognize it.

A season of ministry that once began with introductions and anticipation has entered its final chapter. There is still time within that chapter for gratitude, honesty, forgiveness, laughter, tears, celebration, and blessing.

Those things cannot all happen at once.

Ending well begins by giving them time.

Before pastor and congregation can release one another, they need an opportunity to recognize what they have shared.

For Conversation

When did this transition become real for you, and what changed when it did?

What different responses to the announcement are present in the congregation?

Where do you feel pressure to move quickly toward what comes next?

What does this ending ask of pastor and congregation now?

Chapter Two

Giving Thanks for the Ministry We Have Shared

When a ministry begins to end, memory becomes more vivid.

People remember the first sermon. A baptism. A hospital room. The Sunday after a tragedy. A difficult meeting that somehow ended differently than anyone expected. A mission project that began as an uncertain experiment and became part of the congregation's identity.

The pastor remembers too.

People who opened their homes. Children who grew into adults. Families accompanied through loss. Leaders who became trusted partners. Conflicts that eventually became occasions for growth. Moments when ministry seemed impossibly difficult and others when grace appeared almost effortlessly.

Years of shared ministry leave thousands of memories behind.

Ending well gives us time to notice them.

Gratitude is one of the ways we honor what has been shared.

It is more than thanking the pastor for years of service. Pastoral ministry has never belonged to the pastor alone. Whatever has happened during these years has emerged from a relationship among pastor, congregation, community, and the Holy Spirit.

The ministry belongs to the whole story, and so does the gratitude.

Remember More Than Accomplishments

When congregations begin celebrating a departing pastor, they naturally make lists.

Buildings were renovated.

Membership increased.

A new worship service began.

Debt was retired.

Staff was expanded.

A food pantry opened.

Programs were created.

Those accomplishments deserve recognition.

But they rarely tell us what mattered most.

Ask people what they remember about a pastor who served them years ago and they seldom begin with the strategic plan.

They remember presence.

“She came to the hospital.”

“He knew my children’s names.”

“She sat with us after my husband died.”

“He believed I could lead before I believed it myself.”

“She helped us through a terrible conflict.”

“He made room for questions I thought I wasn’t allowed to ask.”

Much of the most important work of ministry leaves very little institutional evidence.

There may be no report documenting the conversation that helped someone remain married, the prayer offered beside a dying parent, the encouragement that led someone toward a vocation, or the sermon that quietly changed how someone understood God.

Yet these moments become part of the congregation’s life.

Ending well invites us to remember ministry at this deeper level.

Not simply:

What did we accomplish?

But:

How were we changed by being together?

Gratitude Belongs to Everyone

It is easy for a farewell to become a celebration of the pastor.

There is nothing wrong with honoring faithful pastoral leadership. Pastors give years of their lives to congregations, and congregations should have opportunities to express appreciation.

But a shared ministry has many participants.

Elders have led.

Deacons have cared.

Teachers have taught.

Musicians have helped people pray.

Staff members have carried responsibilities few members ever see.

Volunteers have prepared meals, repaired buildings, visited neighbors, balanced budgets, planted gardens, welcomed strangers, taught children, and served communities.

People have prayed for one another.

They have forgiven one another.

They have disagreed and remained together.

They have shown up.

The pastor has participated in all of this, sometimes as leader, sometimes as teacher, sometimes as companion, sometimes simply as another disciple trying to recognize what faithfulness requires.

A healthy ending therefore allows the pastor to say thank you as well.

Thank you for trusting me with your stories.

Thank you for allowing me into your lives.

Thank you for teaching me things I did not know.

Thank you for forgiving my mistakes.

Thank you for the ways you have shaped my ministry.

Thank you for serving Christ beside me.

Mutual gratitude changes the character of a farewell.

The congregation is not merely applauding someone who has completed a term of service.

Pastor and congregation are recognizing that they have been gifts to one another.

Gratitude Does Not Require Pretending

There is a danger in every farewell.

We can become so determined to end positively that we rewrite the ministry.

Suddenly every sermon was wonderful.

Every decision was wise.

Every relationship was healthy.

Every conflict was resolved.

Everyone was happy.

No ministry has ever been like that.

Pastors are human.

Congregations are human.

Shared ministry contains misunderstanding, frustration, disappointment, mistakes, and sometimes wounds alongside everything worthy of celebration.

Gratitude does not require us to deny those things.

In fact, gratitude becomes more meaningful when it is honest.

We can be thankful for a relationship that was imperfect.

We can honor years of faithful service while acknowledging that some hopes were never realized.

We can remember moments of conflict without allowing those moments to define the entire ministry.

We can recognize that pastor and congregation sometimes disappointed one another and still give thanks for the life they shared.

Christian gratitude does not declare that everything was good. It recognizes grace within a story that was fully human.

Sentimental endings can make honest grief more difficult. If everyone is expected to say only wonderful things, those whose experience was more complicated may feel that their stories are unwelcome.

Ending well makes room for gratitude without demanding mythology.

Make Room for Stories

One of the simplest ways to practice gratitude is to tell stories.

Not only stories about the pastor.

Stories about the ministry.

Remember when we tried that?

Remember when the sanctuary flooded?

Remember those children who were in confirmation together?

Remember when we almost gave up on that ministry?

Remember the Sunday everyone showed up?

Remember when we laughed so hard we couldn't finish the meeting?

Remember what happened after the hurricane?

Remember when we realized our neighborhood had changed?

Stories allow a congregation to see a ministry from many perspectives.

The pastor's memory of an event may be completely different from the congregation's. A moment the pastor barely remembers may have profoundly affected someone else. Something leaders considered unsuccessful may have planted seeds that only became visible years later.

As stories accumulate, a larger picture begins to emerge.

No single person owns the meaning of a shared ministry.

The story belongs to everyone who lived it.

That is why gratitude should not be confined to the final Sunday or farewell dinner. The weeks leading toward departure can create many opportunities for remembering. A conversation after worship, a photograph, an old newsletter, a note from someone who moved away, or a story told at a session meeting can unexpectedly reveal something worth receiving with gratitude.

The point is not to preserve every memory.

It is to notice the grace contained within them.

Some Gifts Are Only Recognized at the End

Endings give perspective that ordinary life rarely provides.

While ministry is happening, people are busy living it.

There is another meeting next week. Another sermon on Sunday. Another budget to prepare. Another crisis to address. Another person needing care.

Only when the end becomes visible do people sometimes recognize what has quietly grown among them.

Perhaps the congregation became more generous.

Perhaps it learned how to disagree without separating.

Perhaps new leaders emerged.

Perhaps worship deepened.

Perhaps the church became more attentive to its community.

Perhaps the pastor became a different kind of pastor because of what this congregation taught.

Some changes are dramatic.

Most are not.

Formation often happens slowly enough that we do not notice it while it is occurring.

Looking back allows pastor and congregation to ask:

Who have we become because we traveled this part of the journey together?

That question takes us beyond accomplishments.

It allows us to recognize formation.

Receive the Ministry as a Gift

Gratitude changes the way we understand an ending.

If we believe something belongs to us, losing it feels like deprivation.

If we understand it as gift, we can receive it, cherish it, and eventually release it.

A pastoral relationship is a gift entrusted for a season.

Its value is not diminished because the season ends.

A sermon does not become less meaningful because another pastor will someday stand in the pulpit.

A baptism does not become less sacred because the child grows up.

A friendship does not become meaningless because circumstances change.

Neither does a shared ministry lose its significance because pastor and congregation must eventually part.

The years remain.

The relationships mattered.

The lives changed remain changed.

The ministry becomes part of the story both pastor and congregation carry with them.

Gratitude allows us to say:

This was ours for a time.

We received something from one another.

God was present among us.

And we give thanks.

Gratitude is not the only emotion present when something meaningful ends. The same memories that awaken thanksgiving also remind us of what we are losing, which is why gratitude and grief so often arrive together.

For Conversation

Which stories best reveal what pastor and congregation have given one another?

Beyond programs and accomplishments, how have people been changed during these years?

Whose contribution to the shared ministry might otherwise go unnamed?

What can you give thanks for without pretending the ministry was perfect?

Chapter Three

Making Room for Grief

Gratitude and grief are close companions.

The stories that make us most thankful are often the same stories that make goodbye difficult. We remember because something mattered. We grieve because something we have valued is changing.

Grief therefore belongs within a faithful ending.

Congregations sometimes become uncomfortable with grief during a pastoral transition. There may be an unspoken expectation that everyone should remain positive.

We should celebrate the ministry.

We should be grateful for the years we have shared.

We should trust God with the future.

All of those things are true, and none of them eliminates grief.

Grief is not evidence that a congregation is unprepared for the future.

Often, it is evidence that people have loved one another well.

Only what has mattered deeply is deeply mourned.

We Do Not All Grieve the Same Thing

When a pastor leaves, it can sound as though the congregation has experienced one loss.

It has not.

People are losing different things.

One person may be losing the pastor who sat beside a hospital bed during the worst night of their life.

Another may be losing a teacher who helped them rediscover faith.

Someone else may be losing a trusted colleague.

A child may simply know that the person who always knelt down to speak with them after worship will not be there anymore.

A staff member may be losing a supervisor, partner, or friend.

A congregational leader may be losing someone with whom years of trust have developed.

Others may have had very little personal relationship with the pastor. Their grief may be less about the pastor than about the uncertainty the departure creates.

Who will lead us now?

Will worship change?

What will happen to the ministry I care about?

Will people leave?

Will we be all right?

What people grieve may be not only the person who is leaving but also the stability that person represented.

And some people will not be grieving very much at all.

They may have disagreed with the pastor frequently. They may have felt overlooked or hurt. They may believe the congregation needs different leadership. They may simply experience the relationship differently from those around them.

They may even feel relieved, and that response belongs in the room too.

A congregation does not end well by requiring everyone to feel the same thing.

It ends well by creating enough grace for people to experience the ending honestly.

Grief Has No Congregational Schedule

Pastoral transitions come with calendars.

There is an announcement date.

A final session meeting.

A farewell celebration.

A final Sunday.

Eventually there is a date on which the pastoral relationship officially ends.

Grief pays very little attention to any of them.

Some people begin grieving as soon as the departure is announced.

Others remain focused on practical matters until the final Sunday.

Some feel surprisingly little until several weeks after the pastor has gone, when something ordinary happens and they suddenly realize whom they would have called.

Others may not recognize their grief at all. It appears instead as irritation, criticism, withdrawal, anxiety, or an urgent desire to get on with the search.

There is no correct timetable.

Nor is the pastor necessarily grieving on the same schedule as the congregation.

As we have already seen, the pastor often begins living with the possibility of departure long before the congregation knows anything about it. By the time the announcement is made, the pastor may have spent months thinking, praying, talking with family, imagining alternatives, and slowly coming to terms with leaving.

The congregation begins that journey on the day it hears the news.

This difference can create tension.

The pastor may appear surprisingly calm while members are overwhelmed.

The pastor may already be looking toward another call or toward retirement while members are only beginning to understand what they are losing.

Neither response is wrong.

They are simply standing at different places in the same ending.

Patience allows people to travel at different speeds.

Grief Is Rarely Tidy

We sometimes imagine grief as sadness.

It is often much more complicated.

Grief can look like anger.

Why is the pastor leaving now?

Why weren't we told sooner?

Why didn't the session do something?

Why would God let this happen?

Grief can look like bargaining.

Could the pastor stay another six months?

Could we change the terms of call?

Couldn't the pastor still come back for weddings and funerals?

Grief can look like blame.

Someone must have caused this.

Someone should have prevented it.

Someone must be responsible.

Grief can even look like excessive optimism.

We'll have a new pastor in no time.

This will be easy.

Nothing really needs to change.

Human beings have many ways of protecting themselves from loss.

Congregations do too.

The task of leaders is not to diagnose every response or explain every emotion. Neither is it to make grief disappear.

It is to create enough room for people to experience the ending without allowing anxiety to take control of the congregation.

That may mean listening more than explaining.

It may mean allowing someone to be sad without immediately reassuring them.

It may mean receiving anger without assuming that every angry statement is a proposal requiring action.

It may mean reminding people that uncertainty is uncomfortable without necessarily being dangerous.

At times, the most faithful response is simply: Yes. This is hard.

Pastors Grieve Too

Congregations can easily forget that the departing pastor is also experiencing loss.

Pastors leave more than positions.

They leave people whose lives they have shared.

They leave familiar rhythms, cherished traditions, colleagues, neighborhoods, favorite places, and communities in which they may have invested years or decades.

They may leave a home.

A spouse may leave employment or friendships.

Children may leave schools and relationships.

Retirement brings losses of its own. A pastor whose answer to the question “What do you do?” has been a vocation deeply connected to identity may suddenly face a future in which that answer changes.

Even a pastor leaving joyfully for another call can grieve what is being left behind.

Pastors may also carry grief about the ministry itself.

There were things they hoped to accomplish but did not.

Relationships they wish had been different.

Conflicts they could not resolve.

Mistakes they would handle differently now.

People they could not help.

Dreams that never became reality.

Leaving means accepting that some things will remain unfinished.

That can be painful.

The congregation does not need to care for the pastor as though their roles have suddenly reversed. The pastor needs friends, family, colleagues, spiritual companions, and other appropriate sources of support.

But congregations can offer something important.

They can allow the pastor to be human.

A pastor should not have to pretend that leaving is easy in order to help everyone else through it.

Grief and Hope Can Live Together

Christian hope does not require us to hurry past sorrow.

Scripture is filled with people who trust God and grieve at the same time.

They lament.

They weep.

They remember.

They protest.

They wait.

Faith does not make loss unreal.

It allows us to experience loss without believing that loss has the final word.

That is especially important during pastoral transition.

The congregation does not yet know who will lead it next.

The pastor may not know what the next season will bring.

There may be many unanswered questions.

Hope does not answer all of them.

Hope says something deeper:

God has not left.

The pastoral relationship is ending.

Christ's relationship with the congregation is not.

A pastor's ministry in this particular place is ending.

The pastor's life in God is not.

The future remains unknown, but it is not empty.

God is already there.

That confidence allows grief to be grief rather than turning it into despair.

We can be sad about what is ending and curious about what is beginning.

We can miss someone and release them.

We can give thanks for yesterday without needing tomorrow to look like it.

We can cry at a farewell and still believe that the Holy Spirit is opening possibilities we cannot yet see.

Grief and hope do not cancel one another.

They belong together.

Give Grief Somewhere to Go

Grief that has no place to be expressed does not simply disappear.

Congregations need ways to acknowledge what they are losing.

Some of that happens informally.

People tell stories after worship.

They write notes.

They share photographs.

They sit together over coffee and remember.

Some of it may happen in more intentional conversation.

And some belongs in worship.

The Church has always known something important about loss: there are experiences too deep to be managed only with explanation.

We need prayer.

We need silence.

We need words spoken together.

We need blessing.

We need ritual.

Eventually pastor and congregation will gather for a final act of worship in which gratitude, grief, release, and hope can be held together before God.

We will return to that moment later.

For now, it is enough to allow grief to have a place in the ending.

No one needs to manufacture sadness.

No one needs to require grief from people who do not feel it.

No one needs to hurry those who do.

We simply recognize that something meaningful is changing and allow people to respond as human beings respond when meaningful things change.

Gratitude has helped us recognize what we have received.

Grief helps us recognize what we are losing.

Neither, however, tells the whole story.

Shared ministry has contained gifts and disappointments, faithfulness and failure, joy and regret. Before pastor and congregation can release one another faithfully, there must also be room to tell the truth about the ministry they have shared.

That is where we turn next.

For Conversation

What losses are people experiencing in this ending, and how do those losses differ?

Where have you noticed grief appearing as anger, anxiety, urgency, distance, or relief?

How can leaders make room for varied responses without trying to diagnose or manage them?

Where might the congregation need permission simply to say, ‘Yes. This is hard’?

Chapter Four

Telling the Truth About the Ministry

Every shared ministry has more than one story.

Ask ten people to describe the same years of congregational life and you may hear ten different accounts.

One remembers a season of remarkable growth.

Another remembers how difficult those years were for the staff.

Someone remembers the pastor who stood beside the family during a crisis.

Someone else remembers a conflict that never seemed fully resolved.

A newer member may describe the congregation as warm and welcoming.

A member who has been there for forty years may remember people who left and never returned.

The pastor carries another version of the story.

None of these accounts necessarily cancels the others.

They remind us that ministry is lived by many people from many places within a community.

Ending well requires enough honesty to make room for more than one story.

Gratitude Is Not the Same as Idealization

We have already made room to give thanks, and that matters. But gratitude becomes fragile when it depends upon pretending.

Farewells sometimes create pressure to turn a complicated human relationship into a simple story of success.

We remember what went well.

We tell the funny stories.

We celebrate accomplishments.

We avoid anything that might make the occasion uncomfortable.

There is wisdom in that restraint. A farewell dinner is not the place to settle old arguments. A final worship service should not become a public evaluation of the pastor. Not every disappointment needs to be named aloud, and certainly not every grievance needs one last hearing.

But there is a difference between choosing an appropriate time and place for honesty and pretending that difficult parts of the story never happened.

Every ministry includes both faithfulness and failure.

Pastors make mistakes.

Congregations make mistakes.

Leaders misjudge situations.

People misunderstand one another.

Opportunities are missed.

Good ideas fail.

Poor ideas sometimes consume enormous amounts of energy before everyone admits they were poor ideas.

People hurt one another. They forgive one another, and sometimes they do not. This does not make the ministry unsuccessful; it makes the ministry human.

The question at the end is not whether pastor and congregation can produce a flawless story.

It is whether they can receive the story they actually lived.

More Than One Thing Can Be True

Consider a pastor who offered extraordinary care through illness and death. Families remember that presence with lasting gratitude. The same pastor did not develop lay leadership well, and the congregation became too dependent upon the pastoral office. The care was real, and so was the weakness. Naming one does not require denying the other.

Or consider a congregation that deeply loves its pastor and also carries hurt from a decision the pastor made. Members do not have to decide that the pastor was either beloved or harmful before they can speak honestly. Affection and hurt may both belong to the same relationship.

We do not have to choose one reality in order for another reality to be true.

This is not a way of avoiding judgment when accountability is needed. It is a refusal to reduce years of shared ministry to a single verdict: good or bad, faithful or unfaithful, successful or unsuccessful. Truth becomes more honest when it is large enough to hold what does not fit neatly together.

Not Everything Was About the Pastor

Pastoral transitions have a way of concentrating attention on the person who is leaving.

That can distort the story.

When things have gone well, congregations may give the pastor too much credit.

When things have gone badly, they may give the pastor too much blame.

Congregations are communities. Their life is shaped by pastors, certainly, but also by members, officers, staff, history, culture, community circumstances, previous conflicts, economic changes, denominational realities, and countless decisions made over many years.

A pastor can influence a congregation.

A pastor cannot single-handedly create it.

The same is true of congregational problems.

Some difficulties may be connected directly to pastoral leadership. Others existed before the pastor arrived. Still others emerged from the relationship between pastor and congregation. Some resulted from circumstances no one controlled.

Truth-telling resists the temptation to make one person the explanation for everything.

This matters particularly at an ending because congregations sometimes simplify the past in preparation for the future.

If the departing pastor is remembered as the source of every problem, the congregation may imagine that a new pastor will solve those problems simply by being different.

If the departing pastor is remembered as the source of everything good, the next pastor may be asked to reproduce a ministry that belonged to another person, another time, and another relationship.

Neither story prepares a congregation well for what comes next.

Some Things Remain Unfinished

One of the difficult truths about ending a ministry is that not everything gets completed.

There is always another project.

Another conversation.

Another person we hoped would become involved.

Another conflict we thought might finally be resolved.

Another ministry that almost found its footing.

Another change we intended to make.

Another relationship we hoped would improve.

The approaching departure can create a powerful temptation to finish everything.

Usually that is impossible, and at times it is unwise.

There are matters a departing pastor should complete. Promises should be kept. Responsibilities should not simply be abandoned. Necessary information should be passed along. Decisions that legitimately belong to the present leadership should not automatically be postponed.

But some things need to remain unfinished.

The departing pastor does not need to solve every problem before leaving.

The session does not need to settle every question.

The congregation does not need to arrive at complete agreement about its future.

An ending is not a deadline for achieving perfection.

There is humility in recognizing that some work belongs to those who come after us.

A pastor may have planted something another pastor will cultivate.

A congregation may have begun a conversation whose meaning will not become clear for years.

Some questions should remain questions.

Some unfinished work is not evidence of failure.

It is evidence that ministry continues.

Regret Has a Place Too

Most people who have shared meaningful work for any length of time can look back and identify things they wish had been different.

Pastors can.

Congregations can.

There may be decisions we would make differently now.

Words we wish we had not spoken.

Words we wish we had spoken sooner.

People we failed to hear.

Conflicts we avoided too long.

Risks we should have taken.

Risks we probably should not have taken.

Opportunities we did not recognize until they had passed.

Regret can become destructive when it turns into endless accusation of ourselves or others.

But regret can also be a form of wisdom.

It tells us that experience has taught us something.

A pastor who can say, “I would handle that differently now,” has learned.

A congregation that can say, “We did not listen well during that season,” has learned.

The purpose of acknowledging regret is not to reopen every old wound.

It is to receive whatever wisdom the experience can still give us.

We cannot change what happened.

We can allow what happened to change us.

What About Reconciliation?

Sometimes an approaching departure awakens a desire to repair a damaged relationship.

That can be a gift.

Someone decides it is time to have a conversation that has been avoided.

An apology is offered.

A misunderstanding is clarified.

Forgiveness becomes possible.

Pastor and member discover that neither wants an old conflict to become their final word to one another.

When reconciliation becomes possible, it should be welcomed.

But endings also create unrealistic expectations.

Not every broken relationship will be repaired before the pastor leaves.

Not every person is ready to forgive.

Not every disagreement can be resolved.

Not every wound can be healed by one final conversation.

And reconciliation cannot be forced simply because the calendar says goodbye is approaching.

Ending well may mean making an honest attempt at repair. It may mean accepting that the repair we hoped for is not possible now, or refusing to cause further harm by insisting that another person provide closure on our timetable.

Faithfulness does not always produce resolution.

There are things we entrust to the mercy of God because we cannot make them whole ourselves.

Truth Does Not Require a Verdict

At the end of a ministry, people sometimes want to decide what kind of ministry it was.

Successful.

Unsuccessful.

Transformative.

Disappointing.

Healthy.

Difficult.

Those words may describe parts of the experience.

They rarely describe all of it.

A ministry is not a report card.

Years of shared life cannot finally be reduced to membership statistics, budgets, buildings, programs, conflicts, accomplishments, or even the length of the pastorate.

The deeper questions are more human.

What did we learn?

Where did we grow?

Where did we struggle?

What gifts emerged among us?

What did we discover about ourselves?

Where did we experience grace?

What would we do differently because of what we now know?

Those questions do not ask us to pronounce judgment on the ministry.

They ask us to receive wisdom from it.

Let the Story Become Larger

One of the gifts of telling the truth is that the story becomes larger.

It is no longer only the story of the pastor who is leaving.

It is no longer only the story told by the pastor's strongest supporters.

It is no longer only the story told by the pastor's critics.

It becomes the story of a community that lived through a particular season together.

There was joy.

There was disappointment.

There were things worth celebrating.

There were things we would change.

There were people who flourished.

There were people who struggled.

There were moments when we recognized the Holy Spirit clearly and others when we had very little idea what God was doing.

And through all of it, we were a congregation.

We worshiped.

We served.

We argued.

We prayed.

We learned.

We changed.

We kept becoming.

That larger story gives both pastor and congregation greater freedom.

Neither has to defend the past.

Neither has to condemn it.

Neither has to preserve it exactly as it was.

They can simply tell the truth about it, give thanks for the grace within it, learn from what was difficult, and allow the ministry to become part of the story that has formed them.

Some Truths Are for Later

There is one more distinction worth making.

Ending well does not require the congregation to understand everything this ministry has meant before the pastor leaves.

Perspective takes time.

Some things will look different a year from now.

Patterns that are invisible today may become obvious later. Questions about congregational identity, history, culture, leadership, and vocation deserve deeper attention during the transition that follows.

That work belongs to other movements in the journey.

Ending Well has a more modest task.

We are not trying to determine everything the congregation should carry into the future.

We are trying to bring one particular relationship to an honest conclusion.

That is enough.

We can give thanks for what was good.

We can acknowledge what was difficult.

We can learn what is ours to learn.

We can leave some things unresolved.

And we can entrust the rest to God.

Once we can tell the truth about what we have shared, another part of the ending becomes possible.

The pastor can begin the particular work that belongs to leaving.

For Conversation

Where do gratitude and disappointment both belong in the story of this ministry?

In what ways might the pastor be receiving too much credit or too much blame?

What remains unfinished, and what genuinely belongs to this ending rather than later transition work?

What can pastor and congregation acknowledge honestly without requiring a final verdict or complete resolution?

Chapter Five

The Pastor's Work of Leaving

Leaving is part of the pastor's call.

That can be difficult to recognize.

Pastors spend years learning how to arrive, how to build relationships, how to care for people, how to lead, and how to become part of a community. Far less attention is given to learning how to leave.

Yet every pastoral relationship eventually asks this of us.

The pastor who has faithfully entered the life of a congregation must someday faithfully step out of it.

That does not mean disappearing emotionally before the final Sunday. It does not mean becoming detached from people who have mattered. It does not mean treating the remaining weeks as though ministry has already ended.

Quite the opposite.

Leaving well is ministry.

It is the pastor's final opportunity to serve this congregation as its pastor.

Stay Until You Leave

Once a departure has been announced, pastors can begin living somewhere else before they have actually gone.

A pastor accepting another call naturally begins imagining the new congregation. There are conversations about housing, schools, moving, new responsibilities, and the ministry ahead.

A retiring pastor has another future beginning to take shape. There may be travel plans, family expectations, a move, postponed projects, or simply the anticipation of a different rhythm of life.

Meanwhile, the present congregation still needs its pastor.

There are sermons to preach.

People become sick.

Meetings continue.

Conflicts do not conveniently suspend themselves.

Someone may die.

Someone may need a conversation that cannot wait.

A faithful departure asks the pastor to remain present to the congregation while also preparing to leave it.

That is a difficult balance.

The pastor does not need to begin anything that cannot reasonably be completed. Neither should the pastor quietly stop caring because attention has already moved toward the future.

There is still ministry to do.

Sometimes the most important gift a departing pastor can offer is simply to remain fully present until it is time to go.

Finish What Is Yours to Finish

An approaching departure creates a natural question:

What needs to be completed before I leave?

Some answers are obvious.

Promises already made should be honored when possible.

Pastoral conversations that require appropriate closure should receive it.

Administrative responsibilities need attention.

Records should be current.

Information known only by the pastor needs to be placed where appropriate leaders can find it.

Responsibilities that have quietly accumulated around the pastor need to be identified.

There may also be decisions that should not be made.

A departing pastor generally does not need to launch a new vision, reorganize the staff, redesign the congregation's ministry, or settle questions that properly belong to those who will live with the consequences.

The approaching end changes the pastor's relationship to the future.

For years the pastor may have appropriately asked:

What should we become?

As departure approaches, another question becomes increasingly important:

What belongs to me to complete, and what now belongs to others?

Knowing the difference is part of leaving well.

Hand Off Without Controlling

Every pastor carries knowledge that does not appear in official records.

Who knows how to reset the alarm?

Which community leader should be called when a particular problem arises?

Where did that annual tradition come from?

Which pastoral care situations require continuing attention?

What commitments have already been made?

What partnerships depend upon relationships the pastor helped establish?

Some of this knowledge needs to be handed off.

But handing off is not the same as writing instructions for the congregation's future.

The difference is essential.

A departing pastor can provide information, identify responsibilities, explain history, and help leaders understand what is currently underway.

What the departing pastor cannot do is ensure that everything will continue exactly as it has.

Those who remain may make different decisions.

They may discontinue something the pastor valued.

They may change a practice the pastor established.

They may discover a better way.

They are allowed to do that.

Eventually the ministry belongs to them in a way it no longer belongs to the departing pastor.

A good handoff therefore says:

Here is what you need to know.

It does not say:

Here is what you must do after I am gone.

Make Room for Personal Goodbyes

Pastoral ministry is intensely relational.

That means institutional closure is not enough.

People need to say goodbye.

So does the pastor.

Some goodbyes happen naturally.

A final meeting with a committee.

A last visit with someone who has been homebound for years.

A conversation with a family the pastor has accompanied through several generations.

A final staff meeting.

Coffee with someone who became a trusted partner in ministry.

These moments do not need to be dramatic.

Often the simplest words are enough.

Thank you.

I have loved being your pastor.

You taught me something.

I will remember this.

I am grateful we shared these years.

Goodbyes allow relationships to be honored rather than simply interrupted.

They also provide an opportunity to say things that should not be left unsaid.

Affection can be expressed.

Gratitude can be named.

An apology may sometimes be appropriate.

Encouragement can be offered.

But personal goodbyes require some wisdom.

A pastor cannot create an elaborate farewell with every member of the congregation. Trying to do so may exhaust both pastor and congregation and inevitably leave someone feeling overlooked.

Nor should a final conversation become an opportunity to settle every unresolved disagreement.

The goal is not to manufacture perfect closure.

It is to acknowledge that a relationship mattered and that its pastoral form is ending.

Be Careful With Promises Made at Goodbye

Goodbyes make people generous.

They also make people anxious.

That combination can produce promises neither pastor nor congregation will know how to keep.

“You can always call me.”

“Of course I’ll come back for the wedding.”

“If anything happens, let me know.”

“I’ll still be around.”

“I’m only a phone call away.”

These words are usually offered with love.

But love sometimes needs to resist the promise that makes this moment easier while making the next season harder.

The pastor does not yet know what the congregation’s future pastoral relationships will require.

The congregation does not know what its next pastor will need in order to establish trust.

The departing pastor may not even know what distance will be necessary personally in order to enter retirement or another call with integrity.

There will be time to think carefully about boundaries.

At the moment of goodbye, it is enough to say what is true.

I care about you.

Our relationship has mattered to me.

I am grateful for what we have shared.

Those statements do not need a promise attached to them.

Let People Give Something Back

Pastors are accustomed to giving.

They preach.

They visit.

They listen.

They pray.

They teach.

They accompany.

They lead.

Leaving places pastors in the uncomfortable position of receiving.

People may want to write letters.

Tell stories.

Give gifts.

Host celebrations.

Say things they have never said before.

Some pastors find this embarrassing. They minimize the attention, deflect compliments, or insist that no one make a fuss.

Humility is a virtue.

Refusing to allow people to express gratitude is not always humility.

Receiving may be the final gift a pastor gives the congregation.

People need opportunities to say:

You mattered to me.

Your ministry changed something in my life.

Thank you.

A pastor does not need to agree with every compliment or enjoy being the center of attention.

The pastor can simply receive the gratitude being offered: “Thank you. It has been a privilege to be your pastor.” Often, that is enough.

Relinquish Influence and Responsibility

Pastors who love their congregations naturally care about what happens after they leave. They may have strong convictions about what should continue, what should change, and who should lead. Leaving faithfully means recognizing that those decisions will belong to others.

The departing pastor can provide information, complete what is theirs to complete, and speak honestly when asked. The pastor should not recruit allies to preserve a legacy, shape future decisions from behind the scenes, or remain available to rescue the congregation from choices the former pastor would not make.

For years the pastor has carried responsibility for this congregation. Now that responsibility must be handed back. The pastor does not have to secure the congregation's future before leaving. The Church belongs to Jesus Christ; the pastor has served within Christ's ministry for a season.

The pastor's final work is to stay present, finish faithfully, hand off what others need, say goodbye, receive gratitude, and then relinquish the authority that came with the call. That is enough. The congregation has work of its own: it must let the pastor go.

For Conversation

What belongs to the pastor to finish, and what should now be entrusted to others?

What knowledge or responsibility needs to be handed off without controlling what happens afterward?

Which relationships warrant an intentional goodbye, and what can be said honestly within the time available?

What influence or responsibility must the pastor relinquish in order truly to leave?

Chapter Six

Leaving Staff Relationships Well

Pastors do not serve congregations alone.

Over the course of a ministry, staff members may become some of the pastor's closest partners. They have planned worship together, navigated crises, managed conflict, solved problems no one else knew existed, celebrated successes, survived difficult meetings, and sometimes laughed together about things that would make very little sense to anyone outside church work.

Some staff relationships remain primarily professional.

Others become friendships.

Some become enduring collegial relationships built around mutual respect and complementary gifts.

Then the pastor announces a departure.

The congregation is losing a pastor.

The pastor is leaving a congregation.

But staff members are losing something different.

A colleague is leaving.

A supervisor may be leaving.

A working partnership is ending.

And for staff, the departure may raise questions that are both relational and very practical.

What happens to my work?

Who will supervise me?

Will my responsibilities change?

What happens when new leadership arrives?

Does the new pastor have the authority to change my position?

Am I supposed to keep everything functioning until someone else comes?

And beneath those questions may be another one:

What happens to us?

Ending well requires attention to that relationship too.

Staff Hear the Announcement Differently

When a pastor announces a departure, members naturally think about what it means for the congregation.

Staff members often think immediately about what it means for Monday morning.

A pastor's departure may alter reporting relationships, decision-making authority, workload, worship planning, communication, pastoral care, personnel matters, and the ordinary routines through which the congregation functions.

Even staff members who are happy for the departing pastor may feel anxious about themselves.

That anxiety should not be interpreted as selfishness.

Their livelihood may be involved.

Their professional future may be involved.

And they know something congregational members sometimes forget: a pastoral transition changes the workplace as well as the church.

Staff deserve clear information about what is known and honesty about what is not.

They should know who will supervise them after the pastor leaves.

They should know where decisions will be made.

They should know which responsibilities are changing immediately and which are not.

They should know whom to ask when questions arise.

And they should not have to discover important information through congregational rumor.

Clarity is one of the ways a departing pastor and congregational leadership care for staff.

Do Not Leave Staff Holding the Pastor's Work

As departure approaches, there is a temptation to hand unfinished responsibilities to the people closest at hand.

Often those people are staff.

Some transfer of responsibility is unavoidable.

But staff should not simply inherit everything the departing pastor no longer has time to complete.

A pastor's departure can expose work that has quietly accumulated around the pastoral role for years.

Who approves this?

Who calls that person?

Who handles the problem when it happens?

Who knows the history?

Who makes the final decision?

Too often, the answer has simply been, “The pastor.”

When the pastor leaves, those responsibilities need to be identified rather than silently deposited on the desk of the church administrator, associate pastor, educator, musician, or whoever appears most capable.

Some responsibilities properly belong to staff.

Some belong to the session or other governing body.

Some belong to temporary pastoral leadership.

Some may no longer need to be done at all.

A faithful handoff clarifies responsibility rather than merely relocating work.

Staff Know Things That Need to Be Heard

Staff members often see a congregation from a different vantage point than either pastor or members.

They know how systems actually work.

They know which responsibilities depend upon informal arrangements.

They know what happens behind Sunday morning.

They may know which annual events require six months of preparation, which community relationships depend upon personal contact, which computer system no one understands, and which apparently simple congregational practice requires twelve invisible steps.

A pastoral transition is therefore not only a time for the pastor to hand information to staff.

It is also a time to listen to them.

What do they need before the pastor leaves?

What responsibilities are unclear?

What information exists only in someone’s memory?

What relationships need introduction or transfer?

What problems have been managed informally that now need a more durable solution?

What does the governing body need to know about how work actually gets done?

Staff should not be expected to become the institutional memory for everything the departing pastor failed to document.

Neither should their institutional knowledge be ignored.

Good transition work listens in both directions.

Do Not Ask Staff to Protect Your Legacy

A departing pastor may care deeply about ministries developed during the pastorate.

So may staff.

They may have built those ministries together.

That shared investment can create a subtle temptation.

“Make sure they don’t dismantle this.”

“Don’t let the next pastor change that.”

“You know why we do it this way.”

“Keep this going after I’m gone.”

These comments may sound like collegial encouragement.

They can become an inappropriate assignment.

Staff should not be made custodians of the departing pastor’s legacy.

They will have to work with the leaders who remain and perhaps eventually with another pastor. They need freedom to form those relationships without being asked to defend the previous pastor’s decisions.

Some ministries may continue.

Some will change.

Some may end.

Staff may have strong opinions about those decisions, and they should contribute their wisdom through the congregation’s appropriate structures.

But the departing pastor should not recruit them to preserve the past.

A colleague does not honor a pastor by keeping everything exactly as the pastor left it.

Say Goodbye to Staff as People

Staff farewells deserve more than a final personnel meeting. These are people with whom the pastor has shared work, sometimes for years.

There may be gratitude that has never been spoken because everyone was too busy doing the next thing.

This is a good time to speak it.

Thank you for the excellence you brought to your work.

Thank you for telling me the truth when I needed to hear it.

Thank you for knowing things I never learned.

Thank you for making my work better.

Thank you for the times you carried more than anyone knew.

Thank you for what you taught me.

Where appropriate, a pastor may also need to acknowledge failures.

Perhaps the pastor did not listen enough.

Perhaps a staff member was not adequately supported.

Perhaps conflict was handled poorly.

Perhaps expectations were unclear.

Perhaps appreciation was felt but seldom expressed.

The purpose is not to conduct a final evaluation of one another.

It is to honor a relationship honestly.

People who have worked closely together deserve the opportunity to recognize what they have shared before the organizational chart changes.

The Professional Relationship May Not End

Here staff relationships differ significantly from many congregational relationships.

Leaving the congregation does not necessarily mean leaving the colleague.

A gifted church administrator may remain someone the pastor calls years later because few people understand church administration as well.

A musician may become a trusted resource for worship questions.

An educator may remain part of a professional network.

A former colleague may become a close friend.

Clergy relationships make this especially visible.

A pastor may leave a congregation while remaining in the same presbytery, diocese, association, synod, conference, or other denominational body. Former staff colleagues may serve together on committees, attend meetings, participate in worship, work on denominational projects, or simply continue as colleagues in ministry.

There is nothing inherently unhealthy about that.

In fact, strong collegial networks are important to healthy ministry.

Pastors need people whose judgment they trust.

They need colleagues with expertise they do not possess.

They need relationships in which they can ask questions, test ideas, seek counsel, and sometimes admit that they do not know what to do.

A pastoral transition should not unnecessarily destroy those relationships.

But it does change them.

Colleague Is Not the Same as Supervisor

A pastor who supervised staff must relinquish that authority.

This can be harder than it sounds.

A former staff member may call for advice.

The new supervisor makes a decision the former pastor thinks is unwise.

A colleague complains about the way the congregation is handling the transition.

Someone asks:

“What would you do?”

There is nothing wrong with colleagues seeking one another’s professional wisdom.

But there is a difference between offering professional counsel and continuing to supervise from a distance.

The former pastor no longer evaluates the staff member.

No longer assigns work.

No longer intervenes with the session on the staff member's behalf.

No longer settles disputes.

No longer determines what should happen inside the congregation.

A relationship that once included authority has to learn how to exist without it.

That may take time.

Do Not Make Staff Your Window Back Into the Congregation

Ongoing staff friendships create another temptation.

They provide an easy way for the former pastor to keep knowing what is happening.

How are things going?

What did the session decide?

How is attendance?

What does everyone think about the interim pastor?

Has the search started?

What happened with that conflict?

And eventually:

What do people think about the new pastor?

These conversations can begin innocently.

They can also turn a former colleague into a source of inside information.

That is unfair to the staff member.

It may place them between loyalties.

It can keep the former pastor emotionally entangled in congregational life.

And it can undermine new leadership even when neither person intends to do so.

A continuing friendship or collegial relationship needs a new boundary:

We can remain interested in one another without using our relationship to maintain the former pastor's involvement in the congregation.

The distinction protects both the friendship and the staff member's ability to belong fully to the ministry that continues.

Staff Need Freedom to Form New Relationships

When another pastor eventually arrives, staff will have work to do that the departing pastor cannot do for them.

They must learn a new person.

A new leadership style.

New expectations.

New strengths.

New frustrations.

The next pastor may organize staff differently.

Meet differently.

Communicate differently.

Delegate differently.

Make decisions differently.

That can be difficult, particularly after a long and healthy staff relationship.

It can also be renewing.

The departing pastor helps by refusing to become the standard against which the next pastor is measured.

Staff should not have to demonstrate loyalty to the former pastor by resisting the new one.

Nor should they have to deny the significance of the former relationship in order to embrace the next.

Both can be true.

We did good work together.

And now you are free to build a different working relationship with someone else.

That may be one of the most generous things a departing pastor can say to a staff colleague.

Bless the People Who Shared the Work

Pastors often receive much of the public recognition for congregational ministry. Staff know how collaborative the work has been. Leaving offers the pastor one final opportunity to name the gifts colleagues brought, give credit generously, and offer honest gratitude without pretending where relationships were difficult.

Then the pastor relinquishes the roles that are actually ending: supervisor, head of staff, and pastoral leader of this congregation. Friendship, collegiality, professional respect, and shared denominational ministry may continue, but they must grow from that new reality. Staff are free to serve the ministry that continues and to build relationships with future leadership.

For Conversation

What do staff members need to know about supervision, authority, responsibilities, and workload before the pastor's departure?

What staff knowledge needs to be heard and included in the handoff?

Where might staff be left carrying work that properly belongs to the governing body or temporary leadership?

Which friendships or professional relationships may continue, and what must change so they do not become a back channel into congregational life?

Chapter Seven

The Congregation's Work of Letting Go

Leaving is not something the pastor does alone.

The congregation has to let the pastor leave.

That may sound obvious. A final date has been announced. The office will be emptied. Keys will be returned. Eventually the pastor will no longer stand in the pulpit on Sunday morning.

But physical departure and relational release are not the same thing.

A congregation can say goodbye publicly while continuing to hold tightly to the pastor privately. Members can celebrate a final Sunday and still expect the pastor to remain available for the relationships and responsibilities that defined the years together.

Sometimes this happens because people do not understand what pastoral departure means; more often, it happens because they do.

Something they have valued is ending, and holding on feels easier than letting go.

The congregation therefore has work of its own.

The Pastor Belongs to the Congregation for a Season

Pastoral relationships become deeply personal.

A pastor may have baptized your child.

Buried your spouse.

Sat with you before surgery.

Helped your family through a crisis.

Listened when you were ashamed to tell anyone else what had happened.

Prayed with you when you could not find words of your own.

Those experiences create bonds that cannot simply be turned off because a date appears on the calendar.

Nor should they be treated as though they never mattered.

But there is an important distinction between a relationship that remains meaningful and a pastoral relationship that continues.

The pastor has been entrusted with a particular role within the congregation for a particular season.

That role comes with access, authority, responsibility, and trust.

When the pastoral relationship ends, those things change.

The memories do not disappear.

The affection does not have to disappear.

The gratitude certainly should not disappear.

But the pastor is no longer the congregation's pastor.

Learning to say that without diminishing what has been shared is part of letting go.

“But This Is Different”

Most congregations understand the idea of appropriate boundaries in principle.

Then something personal happens.

A wedding is announced.

A longtime member dies.

Someone enters the hospital.

A family experiences a crisis.

A former pastor is returning to town.

Suddenly the general principle encounters a particular relationship.

“But she baptized all three of our children.”

“He buried my parents.”

“She promised years ago that she would do my wedding.”

“He understands our family better than anyone.”

“We’re not asking him to come back as pastor. We just want him for this one thing.”

The desire is understandable.

It may even feel loving.

But pastoral boundaries are rarely tested by situations in which no one cares.

They matter precisely because the relationships matter.

If every meaningful relationship becomes an exception, there is eventually no boundary at all.

That does not mean every circumstance has one rigid answer. Different denominations and governing bodies have different expectations. Particular situations sometimes require consultation and wisdom.

But the congregation should understand the larger purpose.

The question is not simply:

Would we like our former pastor to do this?

A better question is:

What will help everyone live faithfully within the relationships that now exist?

That includes the former pastor.

It includes the congregation.

And eventually it includes the person who becomes the congregation's next pastor.

Do Not Ask the Pastor to Keep Being Your Pastor

Congregations can make leaving harder by asking the departing pastor to continue doing what the pastor is trying faithfully to stop.

"Can I still call you if I need to talk?"

"Would you come back if someone in my family dies?"

"Could we keep meeting for lunch like we always have?"

"What if I just need your advice?"

"Could you tell us what you think the session should do?"

Each request may seem small.

Together they can keep the former pastor in a pastoral role long after the formal relationship has ended.

This places the former pastor in a difficult position.

Saying yes may interfere with the congregation's ability to form new pastoral relationships.

Saying no can feel cold or rejecting.

One way congregations love departing pastors is by not repeatedly asking them to choose between affection and appropriate boundaries.

Do not make the pastor say goodbye over and over again.

Let the goodbye mean something.

Make Room for New Relationships Before They Exist

At the moment of departure, there may be no next pastor.

That makes letting go harder.

People are being asked to release a relationship before they know who, if anyone, will eventually occupy that role.

There may be temporary pastoral leadership.

There may be pulpit supply.

There may be staff members or congregational leaders carrying responsibilities in new ways.

Eventually another pastor may be called.

But for a while there may simply be an empty chair.

The temptation is to keep the former pastor nearby until someone else arrives.

That can feel safer.

It can also prevent the congregation from discovering something important.

The space left by a departing pastor is not necessarily a problem that must immediately be filled.

Other people may step forward.

Members may discover gifts they have not previously used.

Officers may assume responsibilities the pastor once carried.

The congregation may learn that some things it assumed required pastoral leadership can be shared more broadly.

New patterns may begin to emerge.

The absence is real.

So is the opportunity.

Letting go creates space before the congregation knows exactly what will fill it.

That requires trust.

Let the Pastor Become Someone Else Too

Congregations sometimes think primarily about their own future after a departure.

The pastor has a future as well.

A pastor who accepts another call needs freedom to become pastor to another congregation.

A pastor who retires needs freedom to discover a life no longer organized around responsibility for this congregation.

A pastor who moves away needs freedom to form new relationships and routines.

Even a pastor who remains geographically nearby needs room for life to change.

Congregations can unintentionally resist this.

They continue sending church news.

They ask for opinions about congregational decisions.

They report conflicts.

They tell the former pastor what the new pastor is doing.

They expect continued interest in the details of congregational life.

Some connection may be natural, especially after a long ministry.

But there is a difference between remaining connected as people and continuing to recruit the former pastor into the emotional life of the congregation.

The former pastor needs permission to stop knowing everything.

To stop being consulted.

To stop worrying about what the session decided.

To stop wondering whether a particular member is angry.

To stop carrying responsibility for a congregation that is no longer theirs to lead.

That freedom is one of the gifts the congregation can give.

Letting Go Is Not Disloyalty

People may resist release because it feels like betrayal.

If we welcome another pastor, does that mean the former pastor did not matter?

If we stop calling, will the pastor think we have forgotten?

If the church changes, are we abandoning what we built together?

No.

Love does not require permanent possession.

In fact, love sometimes makes room for change.

Parents know something about this. We raise children precisely so they can eventually live lives that are not controlled by us. Teachers hope students will someday no longer need them. Mentors rejoice when those they have guided develop wisdom and authority of their own.

The relationship changes because it has accomplished something, not because it meant nothing.

Pastoral relationships can be understood in much the same way.

The congregation honors a pastor not by remaining permanently dependent upon that pastor, but by continuing to live faithfully after the pastor has gone.

The pastor honors the congregation by trusting it to do so.

Letting go is not the denial of love.

It is one of love's mature expressions.

Give the Pastor Permission to Go

There is a gift a congregation can give its departing pastor that may matter more than any farewell celebration.

Permission to leave.

Not grudging permission.

Not, "If you really have to go."

A blessing.

Go.

Enter the next call.

Retire.

Rest.

Move.

Discover what comes next.

Trust us enough to let us continue without you.

We will miss you.

We will remember you.

We will give thanks for you.

And we will not require you to remain our pastor in order to prove that our years together mattered.

There is generosity in that kind of release.

The pastor is freed from the need to remain indispensable.

The congregation is freed to discover its own strength.

Future leaders are given room to lead.

A future pastor is given room to become a pastor rather than a replacement.

And a relationship that has mattered can become memory without becoming unfinished business.

Agreement alone does not make release easy. After a long ministry, love, grief, friendship, habit, and pastoral responsibility can become tangled together. Pastor and congregation need more than good intentions.

They need boundaries that help love take a new form.

Those boundaries are not barriers erected against relationship.

Properly understood, they are acts of love.

That is where we turn next.

For Conversation

What is this congregation most reluctant to release, and why?

Where might affection become an expectation that the former pastor continue providing pastoral care?

What would genuine permission for the pastor to leave sound and look like here?

Which gifts or responsibilities might the congregation begin to recognize in itself as it lets go?

Chapter Eight

Boundaries Are Acts of Love

Few parts of ending a pastoral relationship create more confusion than boundaries.

Everyone understands why a pastor should return the church keys.

It can be much harder to understand why a pastor who has become a friend should not continue providing pastoral care.

The difficulty comes from the very thing we have been honoring throughout this guide.

The relationship was real.

Pastors do not spend years standing beside people in some of the most important moments of their lives without relationships forming. Congregations do not share their stories, vulnerabilities, celebrations, conflicts, children, illnesses, deaths, marriages, and faith with a pastor without bonds developing.

Then the pastoral relationship ends.

What happens to all that affection?

It does not disappear.

But it does need a new form.

Boundaries help that happen.

Boundaries Protect Relationships

We sometimes hear the word *boundary* and imagine a wall.

Keep out.

Do not cross.

Stay away.

Healthy pastoral boundaries are better understood as something that protects relationships by making clear what those relationships now are.

During a call, the pastor occupies a particular place in the congregation's life.

The pastor has authority and responsibility that other members do not have. People share information with the pastor because of that role. The pastor participates in decisions, provides pastoral care, officiates at significant moments, works with staff and officers, and often knows things about congregational life that are appropriately held in confidence.

When the call ends, the role ends.

The affection may remain.

The history certainly remains.

But the authority and responsibility do not.

A boundary helps everyone distinguish between those things.

It says:

What we shared mattered.

And at the same time:

What we are to one another now has changed.

Both can be true.

The Question Is Not Whether We Still Care

Here the emotional difficulty of boundaries becomes clear.

A former member calls because her husband has died.

A couple whose children the pastor baptized announces that their daughter is getting married.

Someone receives a frightening diagnosis.

A longtime friend wants to meet for lunch and talk about problems at church.

The natural response is:

How could I possibly say no?

That question assumes that saying no to a pastoral role means saying no to the person.

It does not.

Care can remain even when pastoral responsibility does not.

A former pastor can be saddened by someone's death without officiating at the funeral.

A former pastor can rejoice in a wedding without being the person who performs it.

A former pastor can care deeply about someone facing illness without resuming responsibility for that person's pastoral care.

The difficult work is learning to separate:

I care about you

from

I am still your pastor.

For years those two things may have been closely connected.

After departure, they cannot remain identical.

Boundaries Protect the Congregation

A congregation needs the freedom to discover how ministry will happen after the pastor leaves.

That may initially feel awkward.

Someone else will make the hospital visit.

Someone else will preach the funeral.

Someone else will hear the story.

Someone else will sit in the meeting.

Someone else will be called when something goes wrong.

If the former pastor continues stepping into those spaces, the congregation never fully experiences the transition.

The old relationship remains available whenever the new reality becomes uncomfortable.

That can prevent other leaders from developing.

It can keep members emotionally attached to the previous pastoral arrangement.

And it can make every change feel temporary, as though the congregation is waiting for the familiar pastor to return.

Boundaries allow the congregation to discover that ministry continues even when familiar patterns do not.

That discovery is part of transition.

Boundaries Protect the Departing Pastor

The congregation is not the only one who needs protection from an ambiguous relationship.

So does the pastor.

Without boundaries, a pastor can leave without ever really leaving.

One phone call seems harmless.

Then another.

Someone asks for advice about a session decision.

A staff member calls to describe a conflict.

A member wants to talk about something the new pastor said.

Someone asks, “What do you think we should do?”

The former pastor may feel useful.

Needed.

Trusted.

Perhaps even vindicated.

Those feelings are human.

They can also pull the pastor back into a role that no longer belongs to them.

A pastor entering another call needs attention and emotional energy for another congregation.

A retiring pastor needs the freedom to discover life beyond responsibility for the congregation.

Whatever comes next, the pastor cannot fully enter it while continuing to carry the pastoral life of the congregation that has been left.

Boundaries therefore give the pastor permission not to know.

Not to solve.

Not to advise.

Not to intervene.

Not to remain responsible.

That too is a gift.

Friendship Makes This More Complicated

Long pastorates inevitably produce friendships.

Some are primarily pastoral relationships that feel like friendships.

Others become genuine mutual friendships.

The distinction is not always easy to recognize.

Simplistic rules rarely capture that emotional reality.

A pastor may have spent twenty years having dinner with the same couple.

Spouses may have become friends.

Children may have grown up together.

People may vacation together or share interests that have little to do with church.

Does the end of the pastoral relationship mean all of that must disappear?

Not necessarily.

But friendship after a pastoral relationship requires unusual care.

The former pastor knows things a normal friend would never have known.

The relationship developed within an unequal role.

Congregational information can easily enter ordinary conversation.

And friendship can become a pathway through which the former pastor remains involved in church life.

A simple question can help:

Is this friendship learning to exist apart from the former pastoral relationship, or is the pastoral relationship continuing under the name of friendship?

There may not always be an immediate answer.

Time and distance can help reveal it.

Geography Does Not Determine the Boundary

Leaving is often easier when the pastor moves hundreds of miles away.

Distance creates boundaries almost automatically.

Retirement can be more complicated.

A pastor may remain in the same community.

The grocery store is the same.

The favorite restaurant is the same.

Children remain in the same schools.

Friendships remain nearby.

People encounter one another at community events.

In smaller communities, avoiding one another may be neither possible nor desirable.

The goal is not avoidance.

Former pastors and members do not need to pretend they have never met.

They can greet one another.

They can be glad to see one another.

They can care about what happens in one another's lives.

The boundary concerns role, not geography.

The question is not:

Can we still speak to one another?

The question is:

What kind of relationship are we creating now?

That is a more demanding question, but also a more humane one.

Social Media Has Changed Leaving

There was a time when pastoral departure often created natural distance.

Someone moved away.

Addresses changed.

Contact became occasional.

Social media has changed that.

A former pastor can now remain present in the daily life of a congregation without ever entering the building.

Members post about church conflicts.

Pictures appear from worship.

A new pastor's sermon is streamed online.

Congregational decisions are discussed publicly.

Former pastors can comment, react, message, follow, and remain connected to hundreds of former members simultaneously.

This makes boundaries less visible but no less important.

The fact that we *can* remain constantly connected does not mean constant connection is healthy.

Neither pastor nor congregation needs a universal rule for every digital interaction.

They do need awareness.

Does this contact help the relationship assume its new form?

Or does it keep the old relationship alive?

The technology is new.

The discernment is not.

Boundaries Are Not Punishment

People sometimes hear post-departure boundaries as rejection.

After all these years, now we're supposed to act like we don't know each other?

No.

That is not what faithful boundaries ask.

They ask pastor and congregation to honor what they have shared enough not to distort it by refusing to let it change.

There is a difference between distance created by anger and distance created by love.

There is a difference between abandonment and release.

There is a difference between saying:

You no longer matter to me

and saying:

You matter enough that I will not keep occupying a role that no longer belongs to me.

Healthy boundaries say the second.

Boundaries Need to Be Talked About Before the Pastor Leaves

The worst time to discover different assumptions about boundaries is after the departure.

Pastor and congregation should talk about them before the final Sunday.

What will change?

What should members expect?

What should the pastor expect?

What guidance does the denomination or presbytery provide?

What should happen when someone contacts the former pastor for pastoral care?

How will weddings and funerals be handled?

What about social media?

What if the pastor remains in the community?

What about returning for worship or special events?

Not every future circumstance can be anticipated.

The purpose is not to create regulations for every conceivable situation.

It is to create shared understanding.

When people understand the purpose of boundaries, they are better able to respond wisely when unexpected situations arise.

That may be one of the places where practical resources are most helpful. The specific circumstances will vary, but the principle remains the same:

Does this choice help pastor and congregation live faithfully within the relationship they now have rather than recreating the relationship that has ended?

Love Learns to Change Its Form

Love does not always mean remaining as close as possible. At times, it steps aside. A departing pastor can care deeply and still refuse a pastoral role that no longer belongs to them. A congregation can remain grateful and stop asking the former pastor to carry its pastoral life.

Boundaries make that change visible. Once pastor and congregation share a clear understanding of them, they are better prepared for the public acts through which a community marks an ending: stories, gratitude, worship, and an actual goodbye.

For Conversation

Which situations are most likely to make boundaries difficult for this pastor and congregation?

What shared expectations need to be clear before the final Sunday?

Where might friendship, geography, staff contact, or social media quietly recreate the former pastoral role?

How can pastor and congregation respond with care when a particular request tests the boundary?

Chapter Nine

Celebrating and Saying Goodbye

Eventually, the ending needs a moment.

For weeks or months, pastor and congregation have known that a shared ministry is drawing to a close. They have remembered. They have given thanks. They have grieved. They have begun saying personal goodbyes. They have talked about what will change when the pastoral relationship ends.

Then the calendar arrives at the final days.

Something that has been happening gradually becomes immediate.

This is the time to celebrate.

Celebration is not an escape from grief. It is one of the ways a community gathers gratitude, affection, memory, laughter, and sadness into a shared experience.

We celebrate because something has mattered.

And then we say goodbye because it mattered enough to deserve an ending.

Celebration Is More Than a Party

Most congregations know how to organize a farewell.

There will be food.

Someone will find photographs.

Stories will be told.

A gift may be presented.

Someone will say something that makes everyone laugh.

Someone else will cry.

These things matter.

A shared meal or reception gives people an informal place to gather around the relationship that is ending. People who would never speak during worship may tell a story over dessert. Children can participate. Former members may return. Staff and congregational leaders can express appreciation. The pastor's family can be included.

There is joy in such gatherings.

There should be.

Pastoral transitions can become so serious that we forget how much ordinary delight belongs to years of shared ministry.

There were ridiculous moments.

Things went wrong.

People laughed.

Inside jokes developed.

Someone forgot something important.

A church supper did not go according to plan.

The pastor said something that has been repeated for fifteen years.

Those memories belong alongside the profound ones.

Celebration lets a congregation enjoy the life it has shared.

But a farewell celebration is not the same as ending the pastoral relationship.

A party can express gratitude.

The Church needs something more.

The Church needs worship.

We Need Ritual Because Words Are Not Always Enough

Christians mark important transitions with ritual.

We baptize.

We marry.

We ordain.

We install.

We gather around hospital beds.

We keep vigil.

We bury our dead.

We come to the Lord's Table.

We understand, sometimes better in practice than in explanation, that certain moments need more than information.

They need to be held before God.

The ending of a pastoral relationship is such a moment.

For years, pastor and congregation have worshiped together. The pastor has proclaimed Scripture, prayed with the people, presided at the Table, baptized, married, buried, blessed, taught, and sent the congregation into the world.

It is fitting that this relationship should also end in worship.

A final service gives pastor and congregation something that private conversations and farewell celebrations cannot provide.

It allows them to say goodbye as the Church.

Not simply as employer and employee.

Not simply as friends.

Not simply as people who have spent years together.

But as members of the Body of Christ who have shared a particular ministry for a particular season and now entrust one another again to God.

Let the Final Sunday Be What It Is

There can be a temptation to make the final Sunday perfect.

The perfect sermon.

The perfect music.

The perfect attendance.

The perfect words.

The perfect ending.

That is a great deal to ask of one worship service.

The final Sunday does not need to summarize an entire ministry.

No sermon can do that.

No liturgy can contain every memory.

No celebration can include every person who mattered.

No final words can resolve everything that remains unresolved.

The day only needs to be faithful.

That may mean familiar music.

Scripture that has meaning for the congregation.

Prayer.

Thanksgiving.

Perhaps communion.

A formal recognition that the pastoral relationship is ending.

Words of release.

A blessing.

And enough space for people to feel whatever they feel.

Some will cry.

Some will smile.

Some will do both.

Some may feel strangely numb.

Children may behave like children.

Someone will probably forget something.

The microphone may not work.

Grace will survive.

The purpose is not to stage a flawless conclusion.

It is to place the ending in the presence of God.

Tell Stories Without Creating a Saint

Farewell celebrations naturally invite stories.

That is good.

Stories help a community remember the particularity of a ministry. They remind us that pastoral relationships are built through thousands of encounters rather than job descriptions.

But farewell stories can become excessive.

At a farewell, every speaker may feel obligated to describe the departing pastor as the greatest pastor the congregation has ever known.

That may feel generous in the moment.

It can also create an impossible shadow over what comes next.

There is no need to exaggerate in order to honor someone.

Specific gratitude is usually more meaningful than grand praise.

Thank you for teaching us to pray.

Thank you for staying with us during that difficult year.

Thank you for loving our children.

Thank you for challenging us when we became comfortable.

Thank you for helping us see our community differently.

Thank you for sitting with us when we were afraid.

These are gifts people can actually receive.

They honor the ministry without turning the pastor into something no human being can be.

A healthy farewell does not create a legend.

It gives thanks for a person.

Remember the Pastor's Family

Pastoral transitions rarely affect only the pastor.

Spouses and partners have formed relationships.

Children may have grown up in the congregation.

Family members may have attended countless congregational events, shared holidays interrupted by emergencies, adjusted family schedules around ministry, and lived with the peculiar reality that someone they love belongs in some way to hundreds of other people.

They may also experience the departure differently from the pastor.

A spouse may be leaving close friends.

A child may be relieved to escape the visibility of being the pastor's child.

Another may be grieving deeply.

In retirement, a spouse may suddenly be wondering what it will be like to have the pastor home on Sunday mornings.

A farewell should acknowledge the pastor's family without assuming that family members experienced the ministry in the same way or want the same level of public attention.

They are not extensions of the pastor's office.

They are people who have also lived through this chapter.

Simple gratitude and genuine care are enough.

Gifts Should Say Thank You, Not Settle an Account

Congregations often want to give something to a departing pastor.

A financial gift.

A piece of art.

A photograph.

A book of letters.

Something connected to the congregation or community.

A gift can become a tangible expression of gratitude.

But no gift can measure the value of a ministry.

A congregation does not need to compensate emotionally for every year the pastor served.

Nor should the size of a gift become a referendum on how much the pastor was loved.

The best gifts usually say something simple:

We know you.

We remember what mattered to you.

We are grateful.

A collection of handwritten notes may carry more meaning than an expensive object. A photograph may capture a story; generosity may allow a retiring pastor to do something long postponed.

There is no universal right gift.

The gift is not the point.

Gratitude is.

Make Room for People Who Cannot Celebrate

Not everyone experiences a pastoral departure as a celebration.

That remains true even on the final Sunday.

Someone may still be angry.

Someone may feel hurt.

Someone may have kept distance from the farewell events because participation feels dishonest.

Someone may be relieved the ministry is ending and uncomfortable saying so while everyone else is celebrating.

Ending well does not require these people to perform emotions they do not feel.

They should not sabotage the farewell.

Neither should the community demand that they participate in an account of the ministry they do not recognize.

There is room in a mature congregation for someone to say:

This ministry was difficult for me, and I still wish the pastor well.

Two realities can exist at the same time.

We can disagree with someone and bless them.

We can carry disappointment and still be grateful for what was good.

We can acknowledge that a relationship was difficult without needing its final moment to become an argument about who was right.

Perhaps that is one of the gifts a Christian community can offer the wider world.

We do not have to resolve every difference before we can bless one another.

Say Goodbye

There comes a point when gratitude needs the words goodbye.

That word can be surprisingly difficult.

We prefer:

See you later.

Keep in touch.

Don't be a stranger.

Come back anytime.

Those phrases soften separation.

They can also avoid it.

A pastoral relationship needs a real ending.

Goodbye does not mean:

You no longer matter.

It means:

This form of our relationship is ending, and we are willing to acknowledge it.

There is dignity in saying that clearly.

Thank you.

We will miss you.

We release you from being our pastor.

Go with our blessing.

Those words create room for both sadness and freedom.

A congregation can organize the celebration, tell stories, give gifts, and prepare a faithful final service. Then it reaches the limit of what planning can accomplish. Pastor and congregation cannot guarantee what happens next. Their final public work is to entrust one another to God.

Celebration brings the shared ministry into view one final time. Goodbye acknowledges that its pastoral form has ended. Blessing will allow pastor and congregation to release the future they cannot control.

For Conversation

What kind of celebration would authentically reflect the ministry pastor and congregation have shared?

How can the final worship service hold gratitude, grief, release, and hope without trying to summarize or repair everything?

How will the pastor's family and people with complicated experiences be included without prescribing how they should feel?

What do pastor and congregation need to say publicly so that goodbye is actually spoken?

Chapter Ten

Blessing One Another and Releasing the Future

There comes a moment when there is nothing more to do but let go.

The stories have been told. The gifts have been given. The final sermon has been preached. People have embraced one another in the hallway. The last boxes have been carried from the office.

And then the pastor leaves.

For all the planning that surrounds a pastoral transition, the actual ending may be remarkably ordinary. A door closes. A car pulls away. Monday morning comes.

Here release becomes real.

Blessing Is Not Approval

Blessing does not mean that everything was perfect. It does not require pastor and congregation to agree about the meaning of everything they experienced together. It is not a final performance review.

Blessing says something more generous: I desire God's good for you even when I will no longer be part of determining what that good looks like.

That blessing can be offered when the years have been joyful. It can also be offered when the relationship has been complicated. We do not have to approve every part of the past in order to entrust one another to God.

We Do Not Own One Another's Future

Pastors carry hopes for the congregations they serve. Congregations carry hopes for their pastors. Over time, mutual investment can begin to feel like a claim.

My church. My pastor. My people. My ministry.

These words can express belonging, but neither pastor nor congregation finally possesses the other. They were entrusted to one another for a season. That season mattered. Now the trust changes.

The pastor blesses the congregation with freedom to continue discerning, to make decisions the former pastor will never make, and to become something the former pastor did not design.

The congregation blesses the pastor with freedom to retire, to serve elsewhere, to rest, to learn, and to discover a life no longer organized around responsibility for this congregation.

Neither has to remain part of the other's future in order to prove that the past was real.

Release What You Cannot Finish

Something will remain unfinished. An apology may never come. A conversation may never happen. A conflict may remain unresolved. A dream may never find enough support. Some relationships will remain complicated.

Ending well does not mean forcing these things into resolution before the final day.

Pastor and congregation can say: We have done what we can. We have not done everything we wish we had. We entrust what remains unfinished to God. Grace continues working beyond our deadlines.

For Conversation

What remains unfinished that needs to be entrusted to God rather than resolved before the pastor leaves?

What future is the pastor being asked to release, and what future must the congregation release?

What blessing can pastor and congregation offer one another honestly, without pretending or requiring approval?

And Now, Go in Peace

At some point, every farewell must end.

There will always be one more story that could be told. One more person who could be thanked. One more thing that could have been said differently.

Ending well does not mean exhausting every possible goodbye. It means reaching the place where pastor and congregation can stop holding on.

Thank you for the ministry we have shared.

Forgive us for the ways we have failed one another.

We give thanks for the grace we have known together.

We release what remains unfinished.

We will not ask the past to become our future.

We entrust one another to Christ.

The God who was present when this ministry began has been present through all that pastor and congregation have shared. That same God is present at its ending. And that same God will be waiting in whatever comes next.

And now, go in peace.

Copyediting Note

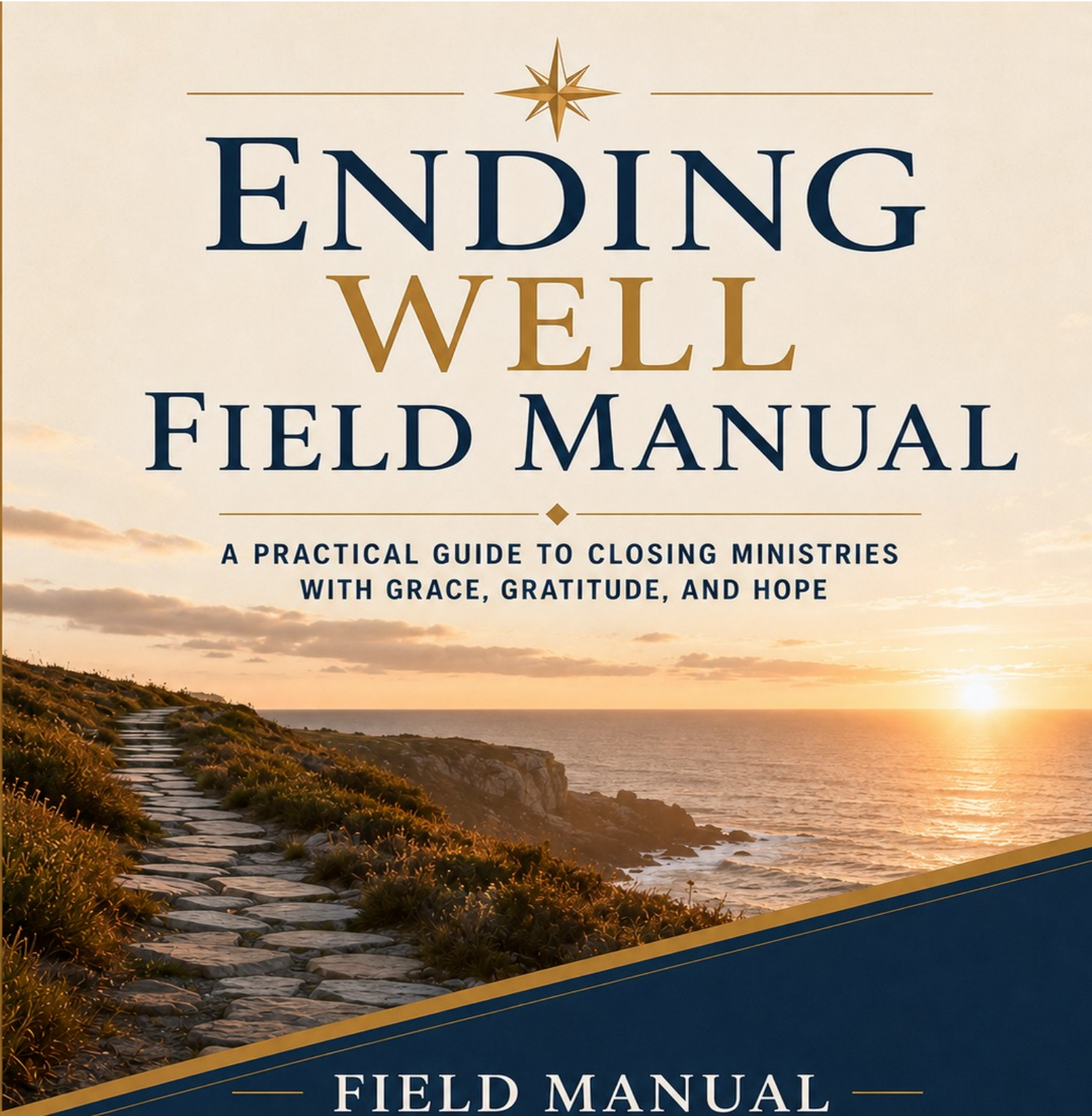
Editorial style: The copyedit follows The Chicago Manual of Style, 18th edition, and standard American English usage, with the manuscript’s established pastoral voice taking precedence where formal alternatives would sound unnatural.

Corrections made: Corrections addressed grammar, syntax, punctuation, quotation marks, apostrophes, pronoun agreement, inclusive references, parallel construction, and a small number of ambiguous or cumbersome sentences and questions.

Standardized usage: Typographic quotation marks and apostrophes were standardized. “Church” remains capitalized when referring to the universal Church or the Body of Christ and lowercase for a local congregation or building. “Session,” “presbytery,” “pastor,” and other offices or bodies remain lowercase in generic references. “Field Guide,” “Field Manual,” “For Conversation,” “final Sunday,” and staff-related terminology were treated consistently.

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ENDING WELL FIELD MANUAL

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO CLOSING MINISTRIES
WITH GRACE, GRATITUDE, AND HOPE

FIELD MANUAL

THE COMPREHENSIVE RESOURCE FOR
EVERY STEP OF THE LEADERSHIP JOURNEY



CLOSE WITH GRACE
Guide good endings that



CARE FOR PEOPLE
Walk together through



LAUNCH WITH HOPE
Release the ministry

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FM 1.1 — Ending Well Timeline and Completion Checklist

Use with: *Ending Well*, Chapter One — “Recognizing That an Ending Has Begun”

Purpose

A pastoral departure gathers many responsibilities into one season: relational and administrative work, worship, staff care, denominational requirements, and the practical transfer of ministry.

This resource helps the departing pastor and congregational leaders:

- work backward from the pastor’s final Sunday;
- identify the significant steps in the ending;
- decide who is responsible for each step;
- distinguish what must be completed from what can remain unfinished;
- coordinate related Field Manual resources;
- confirm that the pastoral relationship is ready to end.

This is an adaptable planning tool, not a universal schedule. A retirement announced many months in advance will unfold differently from an unexpected resignation or departure for another call. Denominational requirements, terms of call, staff arrangements, and local circumstances will also affect the timeline.

Use the sections that fit your situation. Add what is missing. Seek guidance from the appropriate denominational body whenever polity, employment, legal, financial, or personnel matters require it.

Part One — Establish the Known Dates

Complete what is currently known. Leave uncertain dates blank rather than creating false precision.

Pastor: _____

Congregation: _____

Reason for departure:

- ☐ Retirement
☐ New call
☐ Resignation without another call
☐ Completion of designated or transitional ministry
☐ Health or personal circumstances
☐ Other: _____

Date the decision became final: _____

Date staff will be informed: _____

Date the governing body will be informed: _____

Date the congregation will be informed: _____

Date the denominational body will be informed: _____

Date of any required congregational meeting: _____

Date of farewell celebration: _____

Date of final worship service: _____

Official end of the pastoral relationship: _____

Pastor's final working day, if different: _____

Date temporary leadership begins: _____

Other governing dates or deadlines:

Part Two — Name the Planning Team

The departing pastor should participate in planning the ending but should not carry the entire transition.

Identify who will coordinate the work.

Primary congregational coordinator:

Name: _____

Role: _____

Departing pastor: _____

Governing-body representative: _____

Staff representative: _____

Denominational representative: _____

Worship coordinator: _____

Farewell coordinator: _____

Communications coordinator: _____

Other participants:

Planning agreements

Before assigning tasks, agree on the following:

☐ Who has authority to make decisions during the ending

- ☐ Who communicates with the congregation
 - ☐ Who communicates with staff
 - ☐ Who communicates with the denominational body
 - ☐ Who maintains the master timeline
 - ☐ Who follows up when a responsibility has not been completed
 - ☐ Where planning documents and current information will be kept
 - ☐ How confidential or sensitive matters will be protected
-

Part Three — Work Backward from the Final Sunday

Write the final Sunday at the bottom of this sequence, then work backward. Use dates rather than relying only on phrases such as “two weeks before” or “sometime next month.”

Phase One — Before the Public Announcement

Target date or period: _____

The purpose of this phase is to prepare for a clear, trustworthy beginning to the ending.

- ☐ Confirm that the decision and departure date are sufficiently settled for announcement.
- ☐ Consult the appropriate denominational body.
- ☐ Review applicable terms of call, employment agreements, policies, benefits, leave, housing, and compensation matters.
- ☐ Determine who must be informed before the congregation.
- ☐ Decide the order and timing of communication.
- ☐ Prepare the pastor’s announcement or departure letter.
- ☐ Prepare the governing body’s accompanying or follow-up communication.
- ☐ Prepare an initial staff communication.
- ☐ Identify information that is appropriate to share publicly.
- ☐ Identify information that should remain private or confidential.
- ☐ Anticipate the congregation’s most immediate questions.
- ☐ Decide who will answer questions after the announcement.
- ☐ Determine how people who are absent, homebound, or not digitally connected will receive the news.

- ☐ Prepare for communication with community partners and other affected organizations.
- ☐ Establish an initial plan for pastoral care, worship leadership, staff supervision, and decision-making after departure.

Use with:

- **FM 1.2 — Departure Communication Planner**
- **FM 1.3 — Pastoral Departure Letter Samples**
- **FM 5.1 — Ending Well Roles and Responsibilities Worksheet**
- **FM 6.1 — Staff Transition and Handoff Worksheet**

Notes and decisions:

Phase Two — Announcement and Initial Response**Target date or period:** _____

The purpose of this phase is to help people receive the news without requiring them to understand or resolve everything immediately.

- ☐ Inform staff and other designated groups in the agreed order.
- ☐ Announce the departure to the congregation clearly and directly.
- ☐ Distribute the written communication.
- ☐ Provide the known dates.
- ☐ Explain what is known about immediate leadership and pastoral-care arrangements.
- ☐ State honestly what has not yet been decided.
- ☐ Identify where questions should be directed.
- ☐ Provide any required denominational or congregational information.
- ☐ Allow time for people to respond without trying to manage every reaction.
- ☐ Correct significant misinformation or rumors.
- ☐ Avoid premature promises about future contact, weddings, funerals, or continuing pastoral care.
- ☐ Schedule the first planning-team review.

Questions to monitor:

- What are people asking repeatedly?
- What information is missing?

- Where is anxiety creating confusion?
- What requires an answer now?
- What can remain uncertain for a while?
- Who may not yet have received the news?

Notes and decisions:

Phase Three — Organizing the Work of Ending

Target date or period: _____

The purpose of this phase is to identify what needs to happen before the pastor leaves and to assign responsibility for it.

Responsibilities and handoff

- ☐ Identify responsibilities currently carried by the pastor.
- ☐ Decide which responsibilities must be completed before departure.
- ☐ Decide which responsibilities will be transferred.
- ☐ Decide which responsibilities will be paused.
- ☐ Decide which responsibilities no longer need to continue.
- ☐ Identify pastoral-care situations requiring an appropriate handoff.
- ☐ Identify commitments already made by the pastor or congregation.
- ☐ Identify records, files, calendars, passwords, keys, accounts, and access that require transfer.
- ☐ Identify institutional knowledge that exists only in someone's memory.
- ☐ Identify important community and denominational relationships.
- ☐ Clarify which unresolved matters should remain unfinished.

Use with:

- **FM 5.1 — Ending Well Roles and Responsibilities Worksheet**
- **FM 5.2 — Pastor's Handoff Worksheet**
- **FM 6.1 — Staff Transition and Handoff Worksheet**

Staff clarity

- ☐ Confirm who supervises staff before and after the pastor's departure.
- ☐ Clarify decision-making authority.

- ☐ Identify expected changes in workload.
- ☐ Ensure staff are not silently assigned responsibilities that belong elsewhere.
- ☐ Ask what staff members need from the pastor before departure.
- ☐ Listen to staff knowledge about how congregational work actually happens.
- ☐ Clarify where staff questions and concerns should be directed.
- ☐ Plan an intentional staff farewell or closing conversation.

Gratitude and honest remembering

- ☐ Decide how stories and expressions of gratitude will be gathered.
- ☐ Invite participation from people with different experiences of the ministry.
- ☐ Avoid turning the ending into either idealization or a final performance evaluation.
- ☐ Identify people or groups whose contributions to the shared ministry should be named.

Use with:

- **FM 2.1 — Gratitude, Stories, and Honest Remembering Guide**

Notes and decisions:

Phase Four — Preparing for Goodbye and Release

Target date or period: _____

The purpose of this phase is to prepare the relational and communal ending without trying to manufacture perfect closure.

Personal goodbyes

- ☐ Identify relationships that warrant an intentional goodbye.
- ☐ Choose realistic forms for those goodbyes.
- ☐ Set reasonable limits so the pastor is not expected to meet individually with everyone.
- ☐ Identify gratitude, encouragement, apology, or acknowledgment that should not be left unsaid.
- ☐ Avoid using final conversations to settle every unresolved disagreement.

Use with:

- **FM 5.3 — Personal Goodbye Planner for the Departing Pastor**

Boundaries

- ☐ Schedule a boundary conversation with the pastor and governing body.
- ☐ Review denominational expectations.
- ☐ Discuss future pastoral care.
- ☐ Discuss weddings and funerals.
- ☐ Discuss worship attendance and visits to the congregation.
- ☐ Discuss friendships and informal contact.
- ☐ Discuss social media and digital communication.
- ☐ Discuss contact with staff.
- ☐ Discuss community encounters if the pastor remains nearby.
- ☐ Agree on how unexpected requests will be handled.
- ☐ Communicate the shared boundary expectations to the congregation.

Use with:

- **FM 8.1 — Boundary Conversation Guide and Scenarios**

Farewell and worship

- ☐ Confirm the farewell celebration date, leadership, participants, and budget.
- ☐ Determine how the pastor's family will be included.
- ☐ Plan opportunities for congregational participation.
- ☐ Select gifts or tangible expressions of gratitude, if appropriate.
- ☐ Confirm the final worship-service structure.
- ☐ Select appropriate Scripture, music, prayers, and liturgical leadership.
- ☐ Include words of thanksgiving, release, and blessing.
- ☐ Make room for people whose experience of the ministry is complicated.
- ☐ Coordinate hospitality, accessibility, communication, and practical arrangements.

Use with:

- **FM 9.1 — Farewell Celebration Planner**

- **FM 9.2 — Final Worship: Thanksgiving, Release, and Blessing**

Notes and decisions:

Phase Five — The Final Weeks**Target date or period:** _____

The purpose of this phase is to complete the pastor's work without allowing final tasks to overwhelm the actual goodbye.

- ☐ Review the master timeline with all responsible leaders.
- ☐ Confirm that staff know who will supervise them after departure.
- ☐ Confirm pastoral-care coverage.
- ☐ Confirm worship leadership after the final Sunday.
- ☐ Complete the pastor's handoff materials.
- ☐ Transfer necessary records, keys, accounts, passwords, calendars, and access.
- ☐ Confirm the status of benefits, compensation, housing, reimbursements, and other employment matters.
- ☐ Complete or transfer commitments already made.
- ☐ Communicate any final practical information to the congregation.
- ☐ Conduct remaining personal goodbyes.
- ☐ Hold the staff closing conversation.
- ☐ Confirm farewell-celebration details.
- ☐ Conduct a final review of the worship service.
- ☐ Confirm who will speak words of release on behalf of the congregation.
- ☐ Confirm who will offer blessing to the pastor and family.
- ☐ Confirm how the pastor will bless the congregation.
- ☐ Avoid adding unnecessary new responsibilities to the final weeks.
- ☐ Leave room for ordinary ministry, unexpected needs, and rest.

What still requires attention?

What can be released without completion?

Phase Six — The Final Sunday and Official Departure**Date:** _____

The purpose of this phase is to allow the pastoral relationship to end publicly, honestly, and faithfully.

- ☐ Conduct the final worship service.
- ☐ Include an appropriate act of thanksgiving, release, and blessing.
- ☐ Clearly acknowledge that the pastoral relationship is ending.
- ☐ Provide accurate information about what happens immediately after departure.
- ☐ Make room for gratitude, grief, affection, relief, and complicated responses.
- ☐ Avoid making promises that conflict with the agreed boundaries.
- ☐ Return remaining keys, property, or access.
- ☐ Confirm that responsibility has formally transferred.
- ☐ Allow goodbye to be spoken.
- ☐ Allow the pastor to leave.

Final-day notes:

Phase Seven — Immediately After Departure**Target date or period:** _____

The purpose of this phase is not to begin the full transition process. It is to ensure that essential leadership, care, communication, and responsibility are clear.

- ☐ Activate the temporary supervision and leadership arrangements.
- ☐ Confirm who is providing pastoral care.

- ☐ Confirm upcoming worship leadership.
- ☐ Confirm who moderates or leads the governing body, where applicable.
- ☐ Confirm staff reporting relationships.
- ☐ Remove or transfer former pastoral access to accounts, records, systems, and facilities.
- ☐ Update the website, bulletin, directory, voicemail, emergency contacts, and public information as appropriate.
- ☐ Direct pastoral requests to the appropriate current leader.
- ☐ Respond consistently when members contact the former pastor for pastoral care.
- ☐ Avoid using staff, members, or leaders as channels of information to the former pastor.
- ☐ Address urgent unfinished responsibilities.
- ☐ Communicate immediate arrangements to the congregation.
- ☐ Schedule an early review of how the temporary arrangements are functioning.

Use with:

- **FM 7.1 — Immediate Post-Departure Start-Up Checklist**

Notes and decisions:

Part Four — Master Responsibility Tracker

Use this page for significant responsibilities that need an owner and a completion date.

Responsibility	Person Responsible	Due Date	Status or Notes
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Suggested status terms:

- Not begun
- In progress
- Waiting for information
- Completed
- Transferred
- Intentionally unfinished
- No longer needed

Part Five — Final Completion Review

Complete this review before the pastor's final day.

Communication

- ☐ Staff received clear and direct communication.
- ☐ The congregation received clear and direct communication.
- ☐ Absent, homebound, and less digitally connected members were considered.
- ☐ Community and denominational partners were informed where appropriate.
- ☐ Questions have a clear place to go.

Responsibility

- ☐ The pastor's responsibilities have been completed, transferred, paused, or intentionally ended.
- ☐ The governing body understands its responsibilities.
- ☐ Staff know who supervises them and where decisions will be made.
- ☐ Temporary pastoral-care and worship arrangements are clear.
- ☐ No staff member has silently inherited work that properly belongs elsewhere.

Handoff

- ☐ Pastoral-care information has been transferred appropriately and confidentially.
- ☐ Records and institutional information are current enough for those who remain.
- ☐ Keys, files, accounts, passwords, and access have been transferred or ended.
- ☐ Community and denominational relationships have been introduced or documented.
- ☐ Unfinished matters have been clearly identified.

Relationships

- ☐ The pastor has made realistic provision for personal goodbyes.
- ☐ Staff relationships have been acknowledged.
- ☐ Gratitude has been invited from both pastor and congregation.
- ☐ People with complicated experiences have not been required to pretend.
- ☐ The pastor has not been asked to produce perfect closure with everyone.

Boundaries

- ☐ Pastor and congregational leaders share a clear understanding of post-departure boundaries.
- ☐ The congregation knows what will change after departure.
- ☐ Plans exist for responding to requests involving pastoral care, weddings, funerals, worship attendance, staff contact, and social media.
- ☐ Continuing friendships or professional relationships will not be used to maintain the former pastor's involvement in congregational life.

Farewell and worship

- ☐ The farewell celebration has been planned.
- ☐ The pastor's family has been considered appropriately.
- ☐ Gifts and expressions of gratitude have been coordinated.
- ☐ The final worship service includes thanksgiving, release, and blessing.
- ☐ Pastor and congregation will have an opportunity to say goodbye clearly.

After departure

- ☐ Immediate leadership and supervision are clear.
 - ☐ Pastoral-care coverage is clear.
 - ☐ Worship leadership is clear.
 - ☐ Communication responsibilities are clear.
 - ☐ Administrative access will be updated promptly.
 - ☐ The congregation knows where to direct questions.
-

Part Six — What We Are Choosing to Leave Unfinished

Ending well does not mean completing everything.

Identify matters that will remain unfinished because:

- they belong to future leadership;
- they require more time than remains;
- they should not be decided by a departing pastor;
- they no longer need to continue;
- they cannot be resolved on demand;
- they must be entrusted to God.

Unfinished Matter	Why It Will Remain Unfinished	Who, If Anyone, Receives It
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Final reflection

What have we completed faithfully?

What have we transferred responsibly?

What have we chosen to release?

What remains to be entrusted to God?

This timeline cannot produce a perfect ending.

It can help pastor and congregation attend to what is ending, clarify what belongs to whom, complete what they can, release what they cannot, and arrive at the final Sunday ready to say goodbye.

FM 1.2 — Departure Communication Planner

Use with: *Ending Well*, Chapter One — “Recognizing That an Ending Has Begun”

Purpose

How people first learn that a pastor is leaving shapes everything that follows.

No announcement can remove grief, uncertainty, anger, or disappointment. A clear and thoughtful one can prevent needless confusion and help pastor, staff, leaders, and congregation begin with honesty and trust.

This resource helps the departing pastor and appropriate congregational leaders decide:

- who needs to receive the news;
- in what order people should be informed;
- who will communicate with each audience;
- what information belongs in each communication;
- what should remain private;
- when and how the announcement will be made;
- how questions and follow-up communication will be handled.

Use this planner before drafting the pastor’s letter or announcement.

For sample language, see FM 1.3 — Pastoral Departure Letter Samples

Part One — Clarify the Departure

Before planning communications, record what is sufficiently settled.

Pastor: _____

Congregation: _____

Date this planner is being completed: _____

Reason for departure:

- ☐ Retirement
- ☐ Acceptance of a new call
- ☐ Resignation without another call
- ☐ Completion of designated or transitional ministry
- ☐ Health or personal circumstances
- ☐ Relocation or family circumstances
- ☐ Departure under difficult circumstances
- ☐ Other: _____

Final Sunday: _____

Official end of the pastoral relationship: _____

Final working day, if different: _____

Is the departure date final?

- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Pending the following action or decision:
-

Has the appropriate denominational body been consulted?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not yet required
- ☐ Scheduled for: _____

Are there employment, legal, personnel, benefits, housing, or confidentiality matters that should be reviewed before communication occurs?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Uncertain

If yes or uncertain, who will provide guidance?

Part Two — Establish Communication Principles

Pastor and congregational leaders should agree on several principles before deciding who hears the news first.

Our communication will be:

- ☐ Direct
- ☐ Honest
- ☐ Timely
- ☐ Clear about what is known
- ☐ Honest about what is not yet known
- ☐ Respectful of appropriate confidentiality
- ☐ Consistent across audiences
- ☐ Attentive to staff and others directly affected
- ☐ Accessible to people who are not present in worship or online
- ☐ Free from speculation about future leadership
- ☐ Free from promises that have not been authorized
- ☐ Consistent with denominational requirements

We will avoid:

- ☐ Allowing staff to learn through congregational rumor
- ☐ Allowing the congregation to piece together the news through social media
- ☐ Giving different audiences contradictory explanations
- ☐ Saying more than is appropriate about confidential matters
- ☐ Using vague language that creates unnecessary suspicion
- ☐ Assigning blame in the announcement
- ☐ Defending every decision before people have had time to receive the news
- ☐ Making commitments about weddings, funerals, pastoral care, or future contact
- ☐ Announcing temporary arrangements that have not been confirmed
- ☐ Promising a timeline for calling new leadership
- ☐ Suggesting that everyone should feel the same way about the departure

Our governing communication principle

People do not need to know everything.

They do need to know what is theirs to know.

Part Three — Identify the Communication Team

The number of people involved should be large enough to provide wisdom and small enough to protect the timing and integrity of the announcement.

Departing pastor: _____

Governing-body leader: _____

Communications coordinator: _____

Staff representative, if appropriate: _____

Denominational representative: _____

Personnel or legal adviser, if needed: _____

Other participant: _____

Who has final responsibility for approving:

The pastor's announcement or letter?

The governing body's communication?

The staff communication?

The congregational announcement?

Public or community communications?

Social-media communication?

Who will keep all versions consistent?

Name: _____

Part Four — Map the Audiences

Not every audience needs the same information. Some people need to know earlier because they have responsibilities affected by the departure. Others need to hear promptly because of the relationship or role they hold.

Use this section to decide who needs to be informed and why.

1. Pastor's household and immediate support

Who needs to know?

What support or coordination is needed before the announcement?

2. Denominational leadership

Examples may include the presbytery, committee on ministry, bishop, superintendent, conference minister, association leader, or another governing body.

Who needs to be contacted?

Who will make contact? _____

When? _____

What guidance or authorization is needed?

3. Governing body

Who must be present?

Who will communicate the decision?

When and where will the conversation occur?

What decisions must the governing body make before the public announcement?

4. Staff

Staff should ordinarily receive direct communication before the general congregational announcement.

Which staff members need to be included?

Who will speak with them? _____

When and where? _____

Will all staff receive the news together?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

If not, what sequence is appropriate?

What immediate staff questions should be addressed?

- ☐ Final working date
- ☐ Reporting relationships
- ☐ Supervisory authority
- ☐ Decision-making authority
- ☐ Workload and responsibilities
- ☐ Worship planning
- ☐ Pastoral-care coverage
- ☐ Communication responsibilities
- ☐ Personnel questions
- ☐ Job security or future staffing decisions
- ☐ Where staff questions should be directed
- ☐ What staff may say before the congregational announcement

What cannot yet be answered?

5. Key congregational leaders

Some leaders may require advance notice because they will carry immediate responsibilities. Advance notice should be based on responsibility, not status or closeness to the pastor.

Who needs advance notice?

Why do they need to know before the congregation?

Who will contact them? _____

What are they expected to do with the information?

How long will they be asked to keep it confidential?

6. Congregation

Primary announcement date: _____

Primary setting:

- ☐ Sunday worship
- ☐ Congregational meeting
- ☐ Written communication
- ☐ Video meeting
- ☐ Other: _____

Who will make the announcement?

- ☐ Departing pastor
- ☐ Governing-body leader
- ☐ Pastor and governing-body leader together
- ☐ Denominational representative
- ☐ Other: _____

Will the written letter be available at the same time?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

How will absent members receive the news?

- ☐ Email
- ☐ Postal mail
- ☐ Telephone call
- ☐ Website
- ☐ Recorded announcement
- ☐ Other: _____

How will homebound members receive the news?

How will members without email or internet access receive it?

How will children and youth be considered?

7. Wider congregational community

Consider people who participate but may not appear on an active membership list.

- ☐ Former members
- ☐ Homebound members
- ☐ Inactive members
- ☐ Preschool or school families
- ☐ Program participants
- ☐ Regular visitors
- ☐ Community-ministry participants
- ☐ Volunteers
- ☐ Other: _____

Which of these audiences need direct communication?

Who will communicate with them?

8. Community and ministry partners

Examples may include neighboring congregations, community organizations, schools, funeral homes, hospitals, care facilities, nonprofit partners, and ecumenical groups.

Who needs to know?

Who will contact them? _____

When should they be informed? _____

What do they need to know about future points of contact?

9. Public and digital audiences

Will the departure be announced on the congregation's website?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

Will it be announced through social media?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

Will there be a press release or community announcement?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

Who approves public language?

Who posts or distributes it?

When may public communication occur?

Part Five — Build the Communication Sequence

Complete the sequence before the first communication occurs.

The goal is to minimize the time between related communications while allowing people with genuine responsibilities to receive the news appropriately.

Order	Audience	Date and Time	Communicator	Method	Information Needed	Confidential Until
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						

Sequence review

- ☐ The sequence follows denominational requirements.

- ☐ Staff will receive the news directly.
 - ☐ No group is being informed early merely because of status or friendship.
 - ☐ People receiving advance notice understand why they are receiving it.
 - ☐ The time between advance notice and public announcement is as short as practical.
 - ☐ Written and spoken communications will not contradict one another.
 - ☐ Social-media posting will not occur before direct communication is complete.
 - ☐ People who are absent or less digitally connected have been considered.
-

Part Six — Decide What the Announcement Must Communicate

Most departure announcements should communicate the following clearly.

Essential information

- ☐ The pastor is leaving.
- ☐ The reason for the departure, stated at the appropriate level of detail.
- ☐ The final Sunday.
- ☐ The official end date, if different.
- ☐ Gratitude for the ministry shared.
- ☐ Acknowledgment that the news may bring varied responses.
- ☐ Immediate information about worship, pastoral care, staff supervision, or leadership when known.
- ☐ Where questions should be directed.
- ☐ What will be communicated later.
- ☐ The commitment of pastor and congregation to ending the relationship faithfully.

Information that may be appropriate

- ☐ When the decision was made
- ☐ A brief description of the pastor's next call or retirement
- ☐ How long the pastor has served
- ☐ Preliminary farewell information
- ☐ Denominational next steps

- ☐ The date of a required congregational meeting
- ☐ An invitation to prayer
- ☐ An assurance that additional practical information will follow

Information that usually does not belong in the initial announcement

- ☐ Confidential personnel information
- ☐ Private family or health details not authorized for release
- ☐ Detailed accounts of conflict
- ☐ Accusations or defenses
- ☐ Speculation about why the decision was made
- ☐ Predictions about the congregation's future
- ☐ Descriptions of possible pastoral candidates
- ☐ Promises about the length of the transition
- ☐ Unconfirmed temporary-leadership arrangements
- ☐ Promises that the pastor will return for weddings, funerals, or pastoral care
- ☐ Information supplied primarily to satisfy curiosity

Our announcement must answer these questions**What is happening?**

Why is it happening?

When is it happening?

What does the congregation need to know now?

What has not yet been decided?

When and how will additional information be provided?

Where should people direct questions?

Part Seven — Determine What Is Private

Transparency does not require unrestricted disclosure.

Identify the information that should remain private or limited to appropriate leaders.

Information	Who May Know	Why Access Is Limited	Who May Authorize Release
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Confidentiality review

- ☐ The pastor has identified personal or family information that should remain private.
 - ☐ Personnel information is protected.
 - ☐ Health information is shared only with permission.
 - ☐ Legal or employment advice has been obtained where needed.
 - ☐ Leaders understand the difference between confidentiality and secrecy.
 - ☐ The announcement does not invite speculation through unnecessarily vague language.
 - ☐ No one is being asked to conceal information indefinitely without a legitimate reason.
-

Part Eight — Prepare the Spoken Announcement

A spoken announcement should sound natural rather than like a legal statement. It should also be sufficiently clear that listeners do not have to reconstruct what was said afterward.

Who will speak first?

Name and role: _____

Who will speak next?

Name and role: _____

What must be stated aloud?

- ☐ The departure itself
- ☐ The reason at the agreed level of detail
- ☐ The final Sunday
- ☐ Gratitude
- ☐ Immediate arrangements
- ☐ Where questions should go
- ☐ What happens after the announcement

How will the written communication be distributed?

Will questions be taken immediately?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Limited questions
- ☐ Questions submitted later

Why is this approach appropriate?

If questions will be taken, who will respond?

What questions should not be answered publicly?

Closing words

How will the announcement conclude without rushing people toward reassurance?

Part Nine — Anticipate Immediate Questions

Prepare honest responses to the questions people are most likely to ask.

Do not create answers where none yet exist.

Likely Question	What We Know	What We Do Not Know	Who Will Respond
Why is the pastor leaving?			
When is the final Sunday?			
Who will preach afterward?			
Who will provide pastoral care?			
Who will supervise staff?			
When will we begin looking for another pastor?			
How long will the transition take?			
Can the pastor return for weddings or funerals?			
Will the pastor remain in the community?			
Will there be a farewell celebration?			
What happens to current ministries and projects?			
Where should questions be directed?			
Other:			
Other:			

Useful language when an answer is not yet known

- “That decision has not yet been made.”
- “We will communicate that information when it is confirmed.”
- “The appropriate leaders are working on that question.”
- “We do not want to promise a timeline we cannot guarantee.”
- “Some details need to remain private.”
- “We understand why you are asking, but we cannot answer that question yet.”
- “Here is what we do know.”

Part Ten — Plan the Written Communications

The initial announcement may require more than one letter or message.

Communications to prepare

- ☐ Pastor’s letter to the congregation
- ☐ Joint letter from pastor and governing body
- ☐ Governing body’s accompanying statement
- ☐ Governing body’s follow-up letter

- ☐ Staff communication
- ☐ Homebound-member communication
- ☐ Community-partner communication
- ☐ Website announcement
- ☐ Social-media announcement
- ☐ Congregational meeting notice
- ☐ Farewell information
- ☐ Frequently asked questions
- ☐ Other: _____

For sample language, see FM 1.3 – Pastoral Departure Letter Samples

Version control

Who prepares the first draft?

Who reviews for accuracy?

Who reviews denominational language?

Who reviews personnel or legal concerns, if needed?

Who gives final approval?

Where will the approved version be stored?

Part Eleven — Plan Follow-Up Communication

The announcement is the beginning of communication, not the end.

First follow-up

Date: _____

Purpose:

- ☐ Answer recurring questions
- ☐ Clarify misinformation
- ☐ Provide temporary-leadership information
- ☐ Announce farewell plans
- ☐ Explain boundaries
- ☐ Provide congregational meeting information
- ☐ Other: _____

Who will communicate? _____

Method: _____

Ongoing communication

How often will the congregation receive updates during the ending?

- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Every two weeks
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ When significant information becomes available
- ☐ Other: _____

Who is responsible for updates?

Which topics will require later communication?

- ☐ Staff supervision
- ☐ Pastoral-care coverage
- ☐ Worship leadership
- ☐ Farewell celebration
- ☐ Final Sunday
- ☐ Post-departure boundaries
- ☐ Temporary pastoral leadership
- ☐ Denominational process
- ☐ Administrative changes
- ☐ Other: _____

Part Twelve — Responding to Rumors and Misinformation

Not every inaccurate statement requires a public response. Some do.

A response may be necessary when misinformation:

- ☐ Causes harm to a person or group
- ☐ Undermines staff or congregational leaders
- ☐ Misrepresents the reason for departure
- ☐ Creates unnecessary fear
- ☐ Interferes with the congregation's ability to act
- ☐ Violates confidentiality
- ☐ Spreads publicly through social media or community networks

Before responding, ask:

- Is the statement significantly inaccurate?
- Does correcting it require disclosing private information?
- Who is the appropriate person to respond?
- Should the response be private or public?
- Will a response clarify the situation or enlarge the rumor?
- Can we state what is true without becoming defensive?

Agreed spokesperson

Name and role: _____

Agreed response process

Part Thirteen — Special Considerations for Difficult Departures

When a departure involves conflict, discipline, a negotiated separation, legal concerns, alleged misconduct, or significant personnel issues, ordinary communication practices may not be sufficient.

Obtain appropriate denominational, personnel, legal, and pastoral guidance.

In difficult circumstances:

- ☐ Identify who has authority to speak.
- ☐ Use only approved factual language.

- ☐ Protect confidential personnel and legal information.
- ☐ Avoid language that assigns guilt or innocence before an appropriate process is complete.
- ☐ Avoid asking the departing pastor to participate in a joint communication when that would be inappropriate.
- ☐ Do not imply reconciliation or mutual agreement if neither exists.
- ☐ Do not use spiritual language to conceal conflict or suppress legitimate questions.
- ☐ Provide clear information about immediate leadership and pastoral care.
- ☐ Explain where concerns may be directed.
- ☐ Protect people from retaliation or public speculation.
- ☐ Make room for grief, anger, relief, and uncertainty without prescribing a single congregational response.

Who must review all communication?

What may be said?

What may not be said?

Who will care for the congregation after the announcement?

Part Fourteen — Final Communication Review

Complete this review before the announcement occurs.

Accuracy

- ☐ Names, dates, and roles are correct.
- ☐ The reason for departure is stated accurately.
- ☐ Temporary arrangements are confirmed before being announced.
- ☐ Written and spoken communications agree.

Clarity

- ☐ The announcement clearly states that the pastor is leaving.
- ☐ The final Sunday is easy to find.
- ☐ The official end date is clear.
- ☐ Known information is distinguished from undecided matters.
- ☐ People know where questions should go.

Care

- ☐ Staff will hear directly.
- ☐ The pastor's household and privacy have been considered.
- ☐ People absent from worship have a way to receive the news.
- ☐ The communication allows for varied emotional responses.
- ☐ The language expresses appropriate gratitude without idealizing the ministry.

Boundaries

- ☐ The announcement does not promise future pastoral care.
- ☐ It does not promise the pastor's return for weddings or funerals.
- ☐ It does not imply that the relationship will remain unchanged.
- ☐ It does not begin the search for new leadership.

Confidentiality

- ☐ Private information has been protected.
- ☐ Legal, personnel, and denominational guidance has been followed.
- ☐ Those receiving advance notice understand their responsibility.

Follow-up

- ☐ The first follow-up communication is scheduled.
- ☐ Someone is responsible for monitoring questions.
- ☐ Someone is responsible for correcting significant misinformation.
- ☐ The communication plan is connected to the larger Ending Well timeline.

Communication Plan Summary

The congregation will first receive the news on:

The announcement will be made by:

The written communication will be distributed by:

Questions will be directed to:

The first follow-up communication will occur on:

The next practical information the congregation will receive is:

The most important thing we want people to understand is:

The most important thing we must not promise is:

A departure announcement need not answer every question.

It should tell the truth, protect what must remain private, care for those most directly affected, and give the congregation solid ground on which to begin.

FM 1.3 — Pastoral Departure Letter Samples

Use with: *Ending Well*, Chapter One — “Recognizing That an Ending Has Begun”

Purpose

A departure letter gives the congregation a clear account it can return to.

Because people may not remember everything said in an announcement, the letter should preserve the essential information:

- the pastor is leaving;
- why the pastor is leaving, at the appropriate level of detail;
- when the pastoral relationship will end;
- what pastor and congregation can expect during the remaining time;
- where immediate questions should be directed.

The samples in this resource are starting points, not scripts that must be followed exactly.

Use them with:

- **FM 1.1 — Ending Well Timeline and Completion Checklist**
- **FM 1.2 — Departure Communication Planner**

Adapt the language to the pastor, congregation, reason for departure, denominational requirements, and circumstances of the ending.

Before Using a Sample

Replace every bracketed instruction

Text in brackets—such as **[final Sunday]** or **[congregation name]**—must be replaced or removed before the letter is distributed.

Confirm every date

Verify:

- announcement date;
- final Sunday;
- final working day;
- official end date;
- farewell events;
- congregational meetings;
- effective date of temporary arrangements.

Use the appropriate level of detail

A congregation deserves honest communication. It does not require access to every private conversation, family matter, health concern, personnel issue, or denominational process.

Coordinate the letters

The pastor's letter, governing body's statement, staff communication, website announcement, and spoken announcement should not contradict one another.

Avoid premature promises

Do not use the letter to promise:

- future pastoral care;
- participation in weddings or funerals;
- continued access to the pastor;
- regular return visits;
- a particular boundary arrangement;
- a date by which new leadership will be called.

Those matters require separate conversation and clear agreement.

Seek review when necessary

When a departure involves conflict, discipline, negotiated separation, personnel action, allegations of misconduct, legal concerns, or significant confidentiality, all communication should be reviewed by the appropriate denominational and legal authorities.

Sample 1 — Retirement After a Long Ministry

Subject: A Pastoral Letter About My Retirement

Dear members and friends of **[congregation name]**,

After much prayer, reflection, and conversation with my family, I have decided to retire from active pastoral ministry.

My final Sunday as your pastor will be **[date]**, and my service to **[congregation name]** will officially conclude on **[date, if different]**.

This decision comes with more than one emotion. I am grateful for the possibility of retirement and for the life that awaits **[my family and me/me]** in the years ahead. I am also deeply aware that a ministry and relationship that have shaped my life are coming to an end.

For **[number]** years, you have invited me into your worship, work, celebrations, questions, conflicts, illnesses, losses, and hopes. We have baptized children, welcomed members, celebrated marriages, buried people we loved, served our neighbors, faced difficult decisions, and discovered grace together. It has been a privilege to be your pastor.

During the months ahead, we will have time to give thanks for the ministry we have shared, attend to responsibilities that need to be completed or transferred, say goodbye, and prepare for the pastoral relationship to end.

The **[session/governing body]** will communicate separately about immediate leadership, pastoral care, and the congregation's responsibilities following my retirement. Please direct questions about those matters to **[name or office]**.

There will also be time for us to discuss the boundaries that will take effect after my retirement. Those boundaries will honor what we have shared while allowing both the congregation and me to enter the next season faithfully.

I know that this news will bring different responses. Some will feel sadness. Some may feel anxiety about the future. Others may feel gratitude, surprise, or even relief. There is room for all those responses.

For now, I simply want to say thank you.

Thank you for the trust you have placed in me. Thank you for the ways you have shaped my ministry and life. Thank you for serving Christ beside me.

I look forward to being fully present with you during the time that remains and to ending our pastoral relationship with gratitude, honesty, and care.

Grace and peace,

[Pastor's name]

[Title]

Sample 2 — Accepting a New Call

Subject: A Pastoral Letter About a New Call

Dear members and friends of **[congregation name]**,

I am writing to share that I have accepted a call to serve as **[position]** at **[new congregation or organization]** in **[location]**.

My final Sunday at **[congregation name]** will be **[date]**, and my pastoral relationship with this congregation will officially end on **[date, if different]**.

This decision emerged through a season of prayer and discernment. I believe God is calling me toward this new ministry. At the same time, saying yes to that call means saying goodbye to a congregation and people I have come to love.

These years have changed me. You have trusted me with your stories, invited me into important moments, shared responsibility for ministry, forgiven my mistakes, challenged me, encouraged me, and taught me more than I can name in one letter.

I am grateful for what pastor and congregation have shared.

During the time that remains, I intend to continue serving fully as your pastor. There will be ministry to carry out, responsibilities to complete or transfer, conversations to hold, stories to remember, and goodbyes to say.

The **[session/governing body]** will provide information about worship leadership, pastoral care, staff supervision, and other immediate responsibilities following my departure. Questions about those arrangements should be directed to **[name or office]**.

We will also talk together about the boundaries that will govern our relationships after I leave. Those boundaries will allow me to enter my new call with integrity and will give this congregation the freedom to continue its own ministry and eventually form a new pastoral relationship.

I understand that this announcement may bring sadness, surprise, disappointment, uncertainty, or other responses. You do not need to resolve those feelings immediately. We have time to receive the news and attend faithfully to the ending now before us.

Thank you for allowing me to be your pastor.

I will carry profound gratitude for this congregation into the ministry ahead.

Grace and peace,

[Pastor's name]

[Title]

Sample 3 — Resignation Without Another Call

Subject: A Pastoral Letter About My Resignation

Dear members and friends of **[congregation name]**,

After prayerful consideration, I have submitted my resignation as **[title]** of **[congregation name]**.

My final Sunday will be **[date]**, and my pastoral relationship with the congregation will officially end on **[date, if different]**.

I am not leaving to accept another call. **[If appropriate, add one brief sentence about what is known: “I will be taking time for rest and discernment before deciding what comes next.”]**

Decisions of this kind are rarely simple. I have reached this decision after careful reflection and believe it is the right time for my ministry with this congregation to conclude.

I remain grateful for what we have shared. We have worshiped, served, learned, struggled, celebrated, and grieved together. You have entrusted me with responsibilities and stories that I will carry with gratitude.

During the time that remains, I will continue to serve as your pastor. I will work with the **[session/governing body]**, staff, and appropriate denominational leaders to complete or transfer responsibilities and provide the information needed for a faithful handoff.

The **[session/governing body]** will communicate separately about pastoral care, worship leadership, staff supervision, and immediate arrangements after my departure. Please direct questions about those matters to **[name or office]**.

I know this announcement may raise questions, including questions I am not able to answer fully. Some aspects of personal discernment appropriately remain private. What I can say clearly is that this decision has been made with care and that I am committed to ending my service here with honesty and respect.

Thank you for the ministry we have shared and for the ways you have shaped my life and vocation.

Grace and peace,

[Pastor's name]

[Title]

Sample 4 — Health or Personal Circumstances

Subject: A Pastoral Letter About My Departure

Dear members and friends of **[congregation name]**,

I am writing to let you know that I will be concluding my ministry as **[title]** of **[congregation name]** because of **[health/personal/family]** circumstances that require my attention.

My final Sunday will be **[date]**, and my pastoral relationship with the congregation will officially end on **[date, if different]**.

Choose one of the following approaches:

More specific:

As many of you know, **[brief description the pastor has authorized for release]**. After consultation with my family, medical advisers, and **[appropriate denominational leaders]**, I have concluded that I can no longer give this ministry the attention and energy it requires.

More private:

The details of this decision involve personal and family matters that I need to keep private. I am grateful for your understanding and ask that you respect those boundaries.

This is not the ending I had imagined. I carry sadness about leaving and gratitude for the ministry we have shared.

You have invited me into your lives and trusted me with holy responsibilities. We have worshiped, served, prayed, learned, celebrated, and faced difficult seasons together. Those years and relationships will remain meaningful to me.

During the time that remains, I will work with the **[session/governing body]**, staff, and denominational leaders to complete or transfer responsibilities as I am able. The **[session/governing body]** will communicate about pastoral care, worship leadership, staff supervision, and other immediate arrangements.

Please direct practical questions to **[name or office]**. Questions about my private circumstances should not be directed to staff or congregational leaders.

Thank you for your care, prayers, and understanding. Most of all, thank you for the privilege of serving as your pastor.

Grace and peace,

[Pastor's name]

[Title]

Sample 5 — Relocation or Family Circumstances

Subject: A Pastoral Letter About Our Family's Transition

Dear members and friends of **[congregation name]**,

After considerable prayer and conversation, **[my family and I/my spouse or partner and I]** have decided to relocate to **[location]** because of **[brief authorized reason]**.

As a result, I will be resigning as **[title]** of **[congregation name]**. My final Sunday will be **[date]**, and my pastoral relationship with the congregation will officially end on **[date, if different]**.

This decision reflects the needs of our family in this season. It does not diminish our gratitude for this congregation or the relationships that have become important to us here.

Pastoral ministry is never experienced only by the pastor. My family has also shared life with this congregation. They have formed friendships, participated in congregational life, and made their home in this community. We are grateful for the care you have shown us.

During the weeks ahead, I will continue serving as your pastor while working with congregational and denominational leaders to prepare for the conclusion of my ministry. There will be responsibilities to transfer, conversations to complete, and goodbyes to say.

The **[session/governing body]** will provide information about worship, pastoral care, staff supervision, and immediate leadership after my departure. Please direct questions about those matters to **[name or office]**.

We know people will receive this news differently. We ask for your prayers and patience as our family and congregation prepare for this ending.

Thank you for the ministry and life we have shared.

Grace and peace,

[Pastor's name]

[Title]

Sample 6 — Completion of Designated or Transitional Ministry

Subject: The Completion of My Ministry with [Congregation Name]

Dear members and friends of **[congregation name]**,

When I began serving as **[transitional pastor/designated pastor/interim pastor/other title]**, we understood that this ministry would be for a particular season.

That season is now approaching its conclusion.

My final Sunday will be **[date]**, and my pastoral relationship with the congregation will officially end on **[date, if different]**.

During our time together, we have **[briefly name two or three aspects of the ministry without conducting a full evaluation]**. I am grateful for the trust you placed in me and for the work we have shared.

Even when an ending has been anticipated from the beginning, it still asks something of us. Relationships have formed. Ministry has happened. People have shared stories, responsibilities, grief, laughter, conflict, worship, and hope.

During the time that remains, we will attend to the ending itself. We will give thanks, complete or transfer responsibilities, say goodbye, clarify boundaries, and prepare for the pastoral relationship to conclude.

The **[session/governing body]** and **[denominational body]** will communicate about leadership and pastoral care following my departure. Questions about those arrangements should be directed to **[name or office]**.

Thank you for allowing me to accompany you during this part of the congregation's life. I am grateful for the ministry we have shared and for the ways this congregation has shaped me.

Grace and peace,

[Pastor's name]

[Title]

Sample 7 — Joint Letter from Pastor and Governing Body

Subject: An Important Letter About Our Pastoral Transition

Dear members and friends of **[congregation name]**,

We are writing together to let you know that **[pastor's name]** will conclude **[their]** ministry as **[title]** of **[congregation name]**.

[Pastor's name] has **[accepted a new call/decided to retire/submitted a resignation/completed the designated term of ministry/other agreed description]**.

The final Sunday will be **[date]**, and the pastoral relationship will officially end on **[date, if different]**.

We receive this news with **[gratitude, sadness, respect, and other appropriate language]**. During **[pastor's name]'s** ministry, pastor and congregation have shared worship, service, pastoral care, leadership, challenge, celebration, grief, and growth. We are grateful for these years together.

The time between now and **[final Sunday]** will be devoted to ending this pastoral relationship faithfully. We will attend to responsibilities that need to be completed or transferred, provide opportunities for gratitude and goodbye, clarify expectations for relationships after departure, and prepare for final worship together.

The **[session/governing body]** is working with **[denominational body or representative]** to establish immediate arrangements for worship leadership, pastoral care, staff supervision, and congregational leadership following the departure.

At present, we can confirm:

- **[confirmed arrangement]**
- **[confirmed arrangement]**
- **[confirmed arrangement]**

The following matters have not yet been decided:

- **[undecided matter]**
- **[undecided matter]**

We will communicate additional information when it is confirmed. We do not want to promise a timeline or outcome before the appropriate conversations and decisions have occurred.

Questions may be directed to **[name, role, and contact information]**.

We know that people will experience this transition differently. We invite you to receive the news with patience, care for one another, and prayer for **[pastor's name and family]**, our staff, congregational leaders, and the whole congregation.

We are committed to walking through this ending with gratitude, honesty, and trust in God's continuing presence.

Grace and peace,

[Pastor's name]

[Title]

[Governing-body leader's name]

[Role]

On behalf of the **[session/governing body]**

Sample 8 — Governing Body's Follow-Up Letter

Subject: Information Following the Announcement of [Pastor's Name]'s Departure

Dear members and friends of **[congregation name]**,

As you have now heard, **[pastor's name]** will conclude **[their]** ministry with our congregation on **[date]**. The final Sunday will be **[date]**.

We are grateful for **[pastor's name]**'s ministry and for the life pastor and congregation have shared.

We also recognize that this announcement brings questions. Some can be answered now. Others will require time.

What we know

- **[Pastor's name]'s final Sunday will be [date].**
- **The pastoral relationship will officially end on [date].**
- **[Confirmed information about worship leadership].**
- **[Confirmed information about pastoral care].**
- **[Confirmed information about staff supervision].**
- **[Confirmed information about farewell events].**

What has not yet been decided

- **[Undecided matter].**
- **[Undecided matter].**
- **[Undecided matter].**

The **[session/governing body]** is working with **[denominational body or representative]** to ensure that the congregation's immediate responsibilities are addressed. We will provide updates as decisions are made.

Our first responsibility is not to rush toward calling another pastor. It is to attend faithfully to the ministry and relationship that are ending now.

During the weeks ahead, there will be opportunities to:

- give thanks for the ministry we have shared;
- complete and transfer responsibilities;
- support staff through the transition;
- discuss boundaries after departure;
- celebrate and say goodbye;
- worship together on the final Sunday.

Questions may be directed to **[name, role, and contact information]**. Please avoid placing staff members in the position of answering questions beyond their responsibilities or sharing information that has not been confirmed.

We invite your prayers for **[pastor's name and family]**, our staff, congregational leaders, and the whole congregation.

Christ's ministry among this congregation continues, even as one pastoral relationship approaches its conclusion.

Grace and peace,

[Governing-body leader's name]

[Role]

On behalf of the **[session/governing body]**

Sample 9 — Initial Staff Communication

Subject: Important Information About a Pastoral Departure

Dear staff colleagues,

I want you to hear directly that I will be concluding my ministry as **[title]** of **[congregation name]**.

[Brief agreed description of the reason for departure.]

My final Sunday will be **[date]**, and my final working day will be **[date]**.

The congregation will receive this news on **[date and time]** through **[method or setting]**. Until then, please treat this information as confidential so that staff, leaders, and congregation can receive the news in the agreed order.

I recognize that this announcement affects you both relationally and professionally. It may raise immediate questions about supervision, authority, responsibilities, workload, worship planning, pastoral care, and future leadership.

Here is what we know now:

- **[Who will supervise staff after departure]**

- **[Where staff decisions will be made]**
- **[What responsibilities remain unchanged]**
- **[What responsibilities are changing]**
- **[Where questions should be directed]**

Here is what has not yet been decided:

- **[Undecided matter]**
- **[Undecided matter]**
- **[Undecided matter]**

No staff member should assume that every responsibility currently carried by the pastor will automatically become staff work. We will identify responsibilities carefully and determine where they properly belong.

I also want to listen to what you need before I leave. Staff members carry knowledge about this congregation and its work that must be included in a responsible handoff. We will schedule a staff transition conversation on **[date]**.

Thank you for the ministry we have shared. I am grateful for your work, your wisdom, and the many ways you have carried responsibilities that few people ever see.

I am committed to working with you and the **[session/governing body]** so that this transition is handled with clarity, honesty, and care.

Grace and peace,

[Pastor's name]

[Title]

Sample 10 — Brief Website or Email Announcement

[Pastor's name] has announced **[their]** decision to **[retire/accept a new call/resign/complete a designated ministry]** as **[title]** of **[congregation name]**.

The final Sunday will be **[date]**, and the pastoral relationship will officially end on **[date, if different]**.

We give thanks for the ministry pastor and congregation have shared and will provide opportunities for gratitude, farewell, worship, and blessing during the weeks ahead.

The **[session/governing body]** is working with **[denominational body]** to establish immediate arrangements for worship, pastoral care, staff supervision, and congregational leadership after the departure.

Additional information will be shared as it becomes available.

Please direct questions to **[name, role, and contact information]**.

Sample 11 — Departure Under Difficult Circumstances

This sample should be used only after review by the appropriate denominational, personnel, and legal authorities.

Do not use it to announce alleged misconduct, disciplinary action, negotiated separation, or personnel matters without authorized language.

Subject: An Important Communication About Pastoral Leadership

Dear members and friends of **[congregation name]**,

The **[session/governing body]** is writing to inform you that **[pastor's name]** will conclude **[their]** service as **[title]** of **[congregation name]**, effective **[date]**.

Choose only language that has been reviewed and authorized:

- This decision was reached by mutual agreement between **[pastor's name]** and the **[session/governing body]**.
- **[Pastor's name]** has submitted **[their]** resignation.
- The **[session/governing body or denominational authority]** has taken action to conclude the pastoral relationship.
- The pastoral relationship is ending following a process conducted in consultation with **[denominational authority]**.

Because this situation involves **[confidential personnel matters/an ongoing denominational process/legal considerations/private circumstances]**, we are not able to provide additional details.

We understand that limited information may be frustrating and that people will have questions. Protecting appropriate confidentiality is not an indication that questions do not matter. It is a responsibility we must honor.

What we can confirm is:

- **[Pastor's name]'s** service will end on **[date]**.
- **[Information about whether the pastor will lead worship again]**.
- **[Information about pastoral-care coverage]**.
- **[Information about staff supervision]**.
- **[Information about worship leadership]**.
- Questions should be directed to **[authorized contact]**.

Please do not direct requests for confidential information to staff members. Staff will receive the information they need to carry out their responsibilities, but they should not be placed between congregational questions and confidential processes.

We recognize that members may experience grief, anger, relief, confusion, disappointment, or concern. Pastoral care and opportunities for appropriate congregational conversation will be available through **[describe confirmed provision]**.

The **[session/governing body]** is working with **[denominational authority]** to care for the congregation, support staff, and provide clear leadership during this time.

We will share additional information when we are authorized and able to do so.

Please pray for everyone affected and for the congregation as we move through this difficult ending.

Grace and peace,

[Governing-body leader's name]

[Role]

On behalf of the [session/governing body]

Sample 12 — Congregational Meeting Notice

Subject: Notice of Congregational Meeting

A meeting of [congregation name] will be held on [date] at [time] in [location or online-access information].

The purpose of the meeting is to [use the precise language required by denominational polity—for example, “act upon the request to dissolve the pastoral relationship between the congregation and the Reverend ____”].

[Include notice requirements, quorum information, voting eligibility, or other language required by the denomination.]

This meeting will address the formal action required concerning the pastoral relationship. Questions about worship leadership, pastoral care, staff supervision, farewell plans, or the congregation’s later transition will be communicated separately.

Please direct questions about the meeting to [name, role, and contact information].

[Clerk or authorized leader’s name]

[Role]

Letter Review Checklist

Before distributing any letter, confirm the following.

Accuracy

- ☐ Names and titles are correct.
- ☐ The reason for departure is stated accurately.
- ☐ The final Sunday is correct.
- ☐ The official end date is correct.
- ☐ Temporary arrangements have been confirmed.
- ☐ Contact information is correct.
- ☐ The letter agrees with the spoken announcement.

Clarity

- ☐ The first paragraph clearly states that the pastor is leaving.

- ☐ Readers do not have to infer what is happening.
- ☐ Known information is distinguished from undecided matters.
- ☐ The letter identifies where questions should go.
- ☐ The letter explains when additional information will be provided.

Tone

- ☐ The letter sounds like the pastor or governing body sending it.
- ☐ Gratitude is honest rather than exaggerated.
- ☐ The language does not assign blame.
- ☐ The letter does not prescribe how people should feel.
- ☐ The letter does not rush the congregation toward reassurance.
- ☐ The letter does not turn the announcement into a defense of the decision.

Confidentiality

- ☐ Personal, health, personnel, and legal information is protected.
- ☐ The pastor has approved any personal information being disclosed.
- ☐ Required denominational, personnel, or legal review has occurred.
- ☐ Staff are not expected to explain matters they are not authorized to discuss.

Boundaries

- ☐ The letter does not promise continuing pastoral care.
- ☐ The letter does not promise participation in weddings or funerals.
- ☐ The letter does not promise unrestricted future contact.
- ☐ The letter does not imply that the pastoral relationship will continue informally.

Scope

- ☐ The letter does not begin the search for new leadership.
- ☐ It does not promise a transition timeline.
- ☐ It does not attempt to explain the congregation's future.
- ☐ It gives people enough information to receive the ending now.

Final Customization Record**Sample used:** _____**Primary writer:** _____**Reviewed by pastor:** _____**Reviewed by governing body:** _____**Reviewed by denominational representative:** _____**Reviewed by personnel or legal adviser, if required:** _____**Final approval given by:** _____**Date approved:** _____**Date distributed:** _____**Distribution methods:**

- ☐ Worship announcement
 - ☐ Postal mail
 - ☐ Email
 - ☐ Website
 - ☐ Social media
 - ☐ Telephone
 - ☐ Hand delivery
 - ☐ Other: _____
-

A departure letter cannot answer every question or remove every difficult emotion.

It tells the truth, protects what is private, distinguishes what is known from what is not, and helps pastor and congregation begin the work of ending.

FM 2.1 — Gratitude, Stories, and Honest Remembering Guide

Use with: *Ending Well*, Chapter Two — “Giving Thanks for the Ministry We Have Shared”

Also supports: Chapter Four — “Telling the Truth About the Ministry”

Purpose

As a pastoral relationship ends, stories help pastor and congregation recognize what they have shared.

They may remember sermons and hospital visits, baptisms and funerals, mission projects and difficult meetings, unexpected laughter, ordinary kindness, and moments of new discovery.

These memories can help the congregation:

- express gratitude;
- recognize ministry that may otherwise go unnamed;
- honor contributions made by pastor, staff, leaders, members, and community partners;
- acknowledge that the ministry was meaningful without pretending it was perfect;
- gather material for personal goodbyes, a farewell celebration, or final worship;
- help the pastor recognize what the congregation has given in return.

This is an ending resource, not a comprehensive congregational-history project.

It is not intended to:

- evaluate the pastor’s performance;
- assess the congregation’s health;
- resolve old conflicts;
- determine the congregation’s identity;
- identify future ministry priorities;
- begin the search for new leadership;
- collect every important event from the pastorate;
- require people to disclose painful experiences publicly.

The goal is more modest:

To notice the grace contained within a ministry that pastor and congregation shared for a time.

Part One — Decide What You Are Gathering

Before inviting stories, decide what the congregation will do with them.

We are gathering stories in order to:

- ☐ Help pastor and congregation express gratitude
- ☐ Prepare for a farewell celebration
- ☐ Include congregational voices in final worship

- ☐ Create a book or collection of letters for the pastor
- ☐ Identify stories that may be shared aloud
- ☐ Help the pastor prepare personal goodbyes
- ☐ Recognize staff and lay contributions
- ☐ Include people who cannot attend farewell events
- ☐ Make room for people whose experience of the ministry is complicated
- ☐ Other: _____

We are not gathering stories in order to:

- ☐ Conduct a formal evaluation
- ☐ Decide whether the ministry was successful
- ☐ Rank the pastor's accomplishments
- ☐ Create an official history of the congregation
- ☐ Determine what the congregation should do next
- ☐ Gather complaints for the next pastor
- ☐ Reopen conflicts that require another process
- ☐ Pressure everyone to describe the ministry positively
- ☐ Other: _____

How will the stories be used?

- ☐ Shared only with the departing pastor
- ☐ Included in a private book or collection
- ☐ Displayed at a farewell event
- ☐ Shared during a congregational gathering
- ☐ Used in worship
- ☐ Published in a newsletter or on a website
- ☐ Used in a slideshow or video
- ☐ Archived by the congregation
- ☐ Other: _____

Who will decide which stories are used publicly?

Name: _____

Role: _____
_____**Part Two — Form a Small Story-Gathering Team**

A small team can invite broad participation while protecting privacy and keeping the process focused.

Team members**Coordinator:** _____**Governing-body representative:** _____**Staff representative:** _____**Farewell-planning representative:** _____**Worship representative:** _____**Other:** _____**The team's responsibilities**

- ☐ Invite participation
 - ☐ Provide clear prompts
 - ☐ Receive written and recorded stories
 - ☐ Ask permission before public use
 - ☐ Protect private information
 - ☐ Include a range of congregational voices
 - ☐ Notice contributions beyond the pastor
 - ☐ Coordinate with farewell and worship planners
 - ☐ Avoid turning the process into a ministry evaluation
 - ☐ Return sensitive matters to the appropriate leaders or processes
-

Part Three — Establish the Time Frame

The story-gathering process should be long enough for participation but short enough to remain connected to the ending.

Invitation date: _____

Deadline for submissions: _____

Date stories will be reviewed: _____

Farewell celebration: _____

Final Sunday: _____

Ways people may participate

- ☐ Written submission
- ☐ Letter to the pastor
- ☐ Email
- ☐ Online form
- ☐ Recorded audio
- ☐ Recorded video
- ☐ Small-group conversation
- ☐ Table conversation after worship
- ☐ Telephone interview
- ☐ Children's drawings or notes
- ☐ Photographs with captions
- ☐ Other: _____

Provide more than one method when possible so that participation is not limited to people who are comfortable writing, speaking publicly, or using technology.

Part Four — Invite Participation

Use or adapt the following invitation.

Sample invitation

As we prepare to conclude **[pastor's name]**'s ministry with **[congregation name]**, we are gathering stories from the years pastor and congregation have shared.

We invite you to tell us about a moment, relationship, experience, or part of the ministry for which you are grateful.

Your story does not need to describe a major event. Some of the most meaningful parts of ministry happen in ordinary conversations, visits, worship services, meetings, meals, acts of care, moments of laughter, and shared work.

You may write about the pastor, but you may also write about something pastor and congregation experienced or accomplished together. We especially welcome stories that recognize the contributions of staff members, congregational leaders, volunteers, and others who shared the ministry.

We know that people have experienced this ministry differently. You are not being asked to pretend that everything was perfect or to express feelings you do not have. If you wish to offer a private message rather than a public story, please indicate that clearly.

Stories may be submitted by **[methods]** no later than **[date]**.

Please indicate whether your submission may be:

- shared with the pastor;
- included in a private collection;
- shared at the farewell celebration;
- used in worship;
- published by the congregation.

Thank you for helping us recognize the ministry and grace we have shared.

Part Five — Story Prompts

Do not ask participants to answer every question. Offer several prompts and invite each person to choose the one that helps a story emerge.

Remembering the pastor's presence

- When was the pastor present in a way that mattered to you or your family?
- What ordinary interaction with the pastor do you still remember?
- Was there a sermon, prayer, visit, conversation, or act of care that stayed with you?
- When did the pastor help you feel seen, heard, encouraged, or challenged?
- What did the pastor help you understand differently about God, faith, ministry, or yourself?

Remembering shared ministry

- What did pastor and congregation do together that neither could have done alone?
- What ministry, practice, or relationship grew during these years?
- When did the congregation face something difficult together?
- When did grace appear in an unexpected place?
- What moment captures the character of these years for you?
- What did this congregation learn through the ministry it shared with the pastor?

Remembering people and relationships

- Who offered gifts or leadership that should be remembered?

- Which staff members, officers, teachers, musicians, volunteers, or community partners helped make the ministry possible?
- Who grew into leadership during these years?
- What relationship formed because of the congregation's shared ministry?
- Whose contribution might otherwise remain invisible?

Remembering change and formation

- How have you changed during these years?
- How has the pastor changed?
- What capacity did the congregation develop?
- What did people learn to do together?
- What became possible that had not seemed possible before?
- What did pastor and congregation teach one another?

Remembering gratitude within an imperfect story

- What are you grateful for even though the experience was difficult?
- What good emerged from a season that did not unfold as people hoped?
- What did the congregation learn through a mistake, disappointment, or conflict?
- What can you honor without needing to describe the entire ministry as successful or unsuccessful?
- What grace can you recognize now that was difficult to see at the time?

Remembering joy and ordinary life

- When did pastor and congregation laugh together?
- What congregational tradition, meal, trip, meeting, or unexpected event do you remember fondly?
- What happened that would make little sense to anyone who was not there?
- What story captures the congregation's personality?
- What small moment still makes you smile?

Prompts for children and youth

- What do you remember about **[pastor's name]**?
- What is something **[pastor's name]** taught you?
- When did **[pastor's name]** make you laugh?
- What is something you did at church together?
- What would you like to say to **[pastor's name]**?
- Draw a picture of something you remember.

Part Six — A Simple Story Form

Gratitude and Story Submission

Your name: _____

May your name be included with your story?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Use this name instead: _____

Your connection to the congregation:

My story

What this experience meant to me

Someone else whose contribution should be recognized

Permission

My submission may be:

- ☐ Shared privately with the departing pastor
- ☐ Included in a private book or collection for the pastor
- ☐ Shared during the farewell celebration
- ☐ Used during worship
- ☐ Published in the congregation's newsletter
- ☐ Published on the congregation's website or social media
- ☐ Archived by the congregation
- ☐ Used only by the planning team
- ☐ Not shared without contacting me again

Signature or confirmation: _____

Date: _____

Part Seven — Conducting a Story-Gathering Conversation

Stories may also be gathered during a congregational meeting, small group, staff gathering, after-worship conversation, or farewell-planning event.

Suggested length

Approximately 45–60 minutes

Materials

- Copies of selected story prompts
- Pens and paper
- Submission and permission forms
- A visible statement of the purpose
- A designated facilitator
- A designated recorder, if appropriate

Opening words

We are gathering stories in order to give thanks for the ministry pastor and congregation have shared.

This is not a formal evaluation and not an attempt to decide whether the ministry was entirely good or entirely difficult. No shared ministry can be reduced to one description.

We know that people have experienced these years differently. No one is required to speak, express gratitude they do not feel, disclose a painful experience, or agree with someone else's story.

We will listen for moments of grace, relationships that mattered, people whose contributions should be named, and experiences we want to carry into the goodbye.

Suggested process

1. Quiet remembering

Allow several minutes for people to review the prompts and write privately.

2. Sharing in pairs or small groups

Invite each person to share one story, if they wish.

Ask listeners to receive the story without correcting details, competing with it, or telling the person what the experience should have meant.

3. Gathering stories in the larger group

Invite participants to share selected stories with the whole group.

Do not require every small group to report.

4. Naming shared ministry

Ask:

- What do these stories help us recognize?
- Whose gifts or contributions are becoming visible?
- What are we grateful pastor and congregation were able to share?

5. Closing

Thank participants and explain how their stories may be used.

Remind them that public use requires permission.

Facilitator reminders

- ☐ Do not correct someone's memory unless accuracy is essential.
 - ☐ Do not allow one person to dominate the conversation.
 - ☐ Do not invite debate about whether a story is valid.
 - ☐ Do not ask participants to disclose more than they choose.
 - ☐ Do not redirect every story toward praise of the pastor.
 - ☐ Make room for stories about staff, lay leadership, members, and community partners.
 - ☐ Protect confidential pastoral information.
 - ☐ Interrupt storytelling that exposes another person's private experience without permission.
 - ☐ Refer unresolved complaints or allegations to the appropriate process.
-

Part Eight — Making Room for Complicated Experiences

Not everyone will experience a gratitude-gathering process in the same way.

Some people may feel:

- deeply grateful;
- sad;
- angry;
- relieved;
- overlooked;
- uncertain;
- disappointed;
- unwilling to participate;
- grateful for some parts of the ministry but hurt by others.

A faithful process does not require emotional agreement.

Language leaders may use

- “You are not required to describe the ministry in a way you do not recognize.”

- “You may be grateful for one part of the ministry and disappointed by another.”
- “You may offer a private message rather than a public story.”
- “You may choose not to participate.”
- “This gathering is not the place to settle an unresolved conflict.”
- “If your concern requires attention beyond this ending, we can help identify the appropriate place for it.”
- “Blessing someone does not require approving everything that happened.”

When someone offers a difficult story

The facilitator may ask:

- Would you like this received privately or shared with the group?
- Are you seeking acknowledgment, action, or simply a place to name the experience?
- Does this concern belong in the farewell process, or does it require another conversation?
- Is there private information about someone else that should not be shared publicly?
- Who is the appropriate person to receive this concern?

Do not:

- ☐ Debate the person’s experience
 - ☐ Demand that the person identify something positive
 - ☐ Treat anger or relief as evidence of immaturity
 - ☐ Promise reconciliation before the pastor leaves
 - ☐ Use a public story-gathering event to investigate allegations
 - ☐ Include a painful story in public farewell material without explicit permission
 - ☐ Ask the departing pastor to respond immediately
 - ☐ Allow the farewell process to become a final trial of the ministry
-

Part Nine — The Pastor’s Participation

The pastor should have opportunities both to receive gratitude and to express it.

The pastor may be invited to:

- ☐ Attend a story-gathering event
- ☐ Listen without responding to every story
- ☐ Share stories about the congregation
- ☐ Name gifts received from members and leaders
- ☐ Recognize staff and ministry partners

- ☐ Write letters or notes of gratitude
- ☐ Identify stories that should be included in worship or farewell events
- ☐ Receive a private collection of stories

The pastor should not be expected to:

- ☐ Explain every event differently remembered by others
- ☐ Correct every detail
- ☐ respond to every expression of gratitude individually
- ☐ Defend the ministry
- ☐ Resolve every regret
- ☐ Hear unresolved complaints in a public farewell setting
- ☐ Create the official meaning of the shared ministry

Prompts for the pastor

- What did this congregation teach you?
 - Who helped you become a different kind of pastor?
 - What gifts did members, staff, and leaders offer?
 - When did the congregation surprise you?
 - What ministry could not have happened without the congregation?
 - What will you remember with gratitude?
 - What do you want people to know about the part they played in your ministry?
-

Part Ten — Reviewing the Stories

After stories have been gathered, the team should review them carefully.

First review: permission and privacy

For each submission, confirm:

- ☐ The contributor is identified or intentionally anonymous.
- ☐ Permission for each proposed use is clear.
- ☐ Private pastoral information is protected.
- ☐ The story does not disclose another person's experience without permission.
- ☐ Children and youth have appropriate adult permission.
- ☐ The story can be edited for length without changing its meaning.

- ☐ The contributor should be contacted before any public use.

Second review: range of voices

Ask whether the collection includes:

- ☐ Longtime members
- ☐ Newer members
- ☐ Children and youth
- ☐ Older adults
- ☐ Staff members
- ☐ Governing-body members
- ☐ Lay leaders
- ☐ Volunteers
- ☐ People involved in community ministries
- ☐ People whose participation is primarily online or home-based
- ☐ Former members, where appropriate
- ☐ People whose experience of the ministry is complicated

Third review: range of ministry

Ask whether the stories recognize:

- ☐ Worship and preaching
- ☐ Pastoral care
- ☐ Teaching and formation
- ☐ Mission and community engagement
- ☐ Leadership development
- ☐ Staff partnership
- ☐ Congregational care for one another
- ☐ Conflict and difficult seasons
- ☐ Joy and ordinary life
- ☐ Quiet acts of ministry

- ☐ Contributions beyond the pastor

Fourth review: tone

Ask:

- Does the collection express gratitude without creating a saint?
 - Does it honor the pastor without implying that all ministry came from the pastor?
 - Does it recognize the congregation's contributions?
 - Does it make room for complexity?
 - Does it avoid becoming an evaluation?
 - Does it sound like this congregation?
-

Part Eleven — Choosing How Stories Will Be Used

Private book or collection

A private collection may include:

- letters;
- printed stories;
- photographs;
- children's drawings;
- quotations;
- prayers;
- messages from former members;
- staff reflections.

Review before completion

- ☐ Every item has permission for inclusion.
 - ☐ Private information is protected.
 - ☐ Names and dates are accurate.
 - ☐ The collection includes the congregation's gratitude, not only praise for accomplishments.
 - ☐ Staff and lay contributions are recognized.
 - ☐ The collection is presented as a gift, not an official history.
-

Farewell celebration

Stories shared at a farewell event should be:

- specific;
- reasonably brief;
- understandable to the gathering;

- appropriate for public sharing;
- representative of more than one part of the congregation;
- honest without becoming a final grievance;
- focused on shared ministry rather than exaggerated praise.

Speaker guidance

Invite each speaker to:

- tell one story;
 - name why it mattered;
 - recognize others who shared the ministry;
 - remain within the agreed time;
 - avoid promises about future contact;
 - avoid comparing the departing pastor with predecessors or future pastors.
-

Final worship

Stories used in worship should serve worship rather than become the entire service.

They may appear in:

- a prayer of thanksgiving;
- a brief congregational testimony;
- words of gratitude;
- an act of release;
- a sermon illustration, when appropriate;
- a printed litany;
- a blessing.

Do not attempt to summarize the entire pastorate during worship.

Coordinate worship use through FM 9.2 — Final Worship: Thanksgiving, Release, and Blessing

Newsletter, website, or social media

Before publishing:

- ☐ Obtain explicit permission.
- ☐ Confirm names and details.
- ☐ Remove private pastoral information.
- ☐ Consider whether photographs require permission.
- ☐ Avoid publishing a story that could embarrass or expose another person.
- ☐ Do not allow public posts to substitute for direct personal gratitude.

Part Twelve — Gratitude Beyond the Pastor

Pastoral departures can concentrate attention so fully on the person leaving that the shared nature of ministry disappears.

Use this section to identify others whose contributions should be named.

Staff members

Name	Role or Contribution	How Gratitude Will Be Expressed
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Congregational leaders

Name	Role or Contribution	How Gratitude Will Be Expressed
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Volunteers and members

Name	Role or Contribution	How Gratitude Will Be Expressed
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Community and ministry partners

Name or Organization	Contribution	How Gratitude Will Be Expressed
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People who may otherwise be overlooked

Part Thirteen — What This Resource Does Not Complete

This process may reveal questions or concerns that belong elsewhere.

Refer rather than resolve

What Emerged	Where It Belongs
A need for a personal goodbye	FM5.3 — Personal Goodbye Planner
Missing information for handoff	FM5.2 — Pastor's Handoff Worksheet
A staff concern	FM6.1 — Staff Transition and Handoff Worksheet
A boundary question	FM8.1 — Boundary Conversation Guide and Scenarios
A farewell-planning idea	FM9.1 — Farewell Celebration Planner

What Emerged	Where It Belongs
A worship idea	FM9.2 — Final Worship: Thanksgiving, Release, and Blessing
An unresolved complaint or allegation	Appropriate governing, personnel, denominational, or legal process
A question about congregational identity or future mission	A later movement in the pastoral-transition process
A desire to evaluate the completed ministry	A separate, appropriately designed process—not this gratitude resource

Part Fourteen — Completion Checklist

Purpose and scope

- ☐ We clearly stated why stories were being gathered.
- ☐ We did not present the process as a formal evaluation.
- ☐ We did not begin later congregational discernment work.
- ☐ We did not require everyone to participate.

Access and participation

- ☐ People had more than one way to contribute.
- ☐ Homebound and less digitally connected members were considered.
- ☐ Children and youth had an appropriate opportunity to participate.
- ☐ Staff, lay leaders, and community partners were included.

Honesty and complexity

- ☐ We did not require a uniformly positive account of the ministry.
- ☐ People with complicated experiences were treated respectfully.
- ☐ Difficult stories were directed to appropriate settings.
- ☐ Public farewell events were not used to investigate or settle conflicts.

Privacy and permission

- ☐ Every publicly used story has appropriate permission.
- ☐ Private pastoral information is protected.
- ☐ Stories about other people have been reviewed carefully.
- ☐ Photographs and recordings have appropriate permission.

Shared ministry

- ☐ The collection recognizes more than the pastor's accomplishments.
- ☐ Staff contributions are visible.
- ☐ Lay leadership and volunteer service are visible.
- ☐ The pastor has an opportunity to express gratitude to the congregation.

Use of the stories

- ☐ Stories selected for public use are concise and appropriate.
 - ☐ Farewell planners have received the material they need.
 - ☐ Worship planners have received only material appropriate for worship.
 - ☐ Private submissions remain private.
 - ☐ The pastor will receive the intended collection or gift.
-

Final Reflection for the Planning Team

What stories best reveal the grace present during these years?

Whose contribution became visible through this process?

What did the pastor receive from the congregation?

What did the congregation receive from the pastor?

Where did gratitude and disappointment both belong in the story?

What should remain private or unresolved?

What do we want pastor and congregation to carry into their goodbye?

A shared ministry is larger than its accomplishments and more complex than a farewell tribute can express.

Remembering now does not determine the final meaning of everything pastor and congregation experienced together.

It notices what was given, recognizes grace within a fully human story, and makes room to say thank you.

FM 2.2 — Mutual Gratitude Letters and Notes

Use with: *Ending Well*, Chapter Two — “Giving Thanks for the Ministry We Have Shared”

Purpose

A farewell celebration makes gratitude public. Some things are still better said personally.

A letter or note can name:

- a moment the writer still remembers;
- a gift the writer received;
- a way the relationship changed the writer;
- gratitude that was felt but never spoken;
- the contribution of someone whose work was not always visible;
- what the pastor received from the congregation;
- what the congregation received from the pastor.

This resource helps members, congregational leaders, staff, and the departing pastor write honest expressions of gratitude.

Do not aim for a polished tribute or exaggerated praise. A simple, specific note often carries more meaning than a long letter of general compliments.

Gratitude is mutual.

The congregation may thank the pastor.

The pastor may thank the congregation.

Pastor and staff may thank one another for the work they shared.

Members may thank leaders, teachers, musicians, caregivers, volunteers, and ministry partners whose contributions became especially visible as the pastoral relationship came to an end.

Part One — What a Gratitude Letter Is For

A gratitude letter may help someone:

- ☐ Name a particular memory
- ☐ Thank the pastor for a specific act of care
- ☐ Describe how a sermon, conversation, or prayer mattered
- ☐ Recognize the pastor’s faithfulness during a difficult season
- ☐ Thank the congregation for trust, patience, service, or partnership
- ☐ Recognize staff members and lay leaders

- ☐ Acknowledge growth that occurred during the shared ministry
- ☐ Express gratitude within an imperfect or complicated relationship
- ☐ Say something that should not be left unsaid
- ☐ Offer a personal goodbye

A gratitude letter is not primarily for:

- ☐ Evaluating the entire ministry
- ☐ Describing every accomplishment
- ☐ Resolving an old conflict
- ☐ Requesting an apology
- ☐ Explaining why someone else was wrong
- ☐ Asking the pastor to continue providing pastoral care
- ☐ Securing a promise about future contact
- ☐ Asking the pastor to return for a wedding or funeral
- ☐ Influencing decisions after the pastor leaves
- ☐ Requiring the recipient to respond

If one of those matters needs attention, use the appropriate conversation or process rather than placing it inside a gratitude letter.

Part Two — Before You Write

Choose one or two questions. Do not try to answer all of them.

Remembering

- What moment comes to mind first when you think about these years?
- When was this person present in a way that mattered?
- What ordinary interaction do you still remember?
- What story captures something important about the relationship?
- When did you experience grace through the ministry you shared?

Naming the gift

- What did you receive?
- What did you learn?
- How were you encouraged, challenged, comforted, or changed?
- What gift did this person offer that may not have been publicly recognized?

- What became possible because this person served?

Recognizing shared ministry

- What did pastor and congregation accomplish together?
- What did the congregation give the pastor?
- What did the pastor give the congregation?
- Who else contributed to the ministry you are remembering?
- What did you learn by serving alongside one another?

Writing honestly

- What can you say with complete sincerity?
- What are you grateful for even though the relationship was imperfect?
- Is there a specific good you can name without pretending that everything was good?
- Is there something you should avoid saying because it would be exaggerated or untrue?
- Does this letter respect both gratitude and appropriate boundaries?

Saying goodbye

- What do you want the person to carry from this relationship?
 - What blessing can you offer?
 - What final word of gratitude should not be left unspoken?
 - Can you say goodbye without attaching a request or promise?
-

Part Three — A Simple Structure

A gratitude letter does not need to be long. Four movements are enough.

1. Name the reason for writing

Examples:

- “As your ministry with us comes to an end, I want to thank you.”
- “Before you leave, I want to tell you about a moment I have never forgotten.”
- “I have been thinking about what these years have meant to me.”
- “As we prepare to say goodbye, I want to name something I received from you.”
- “I do not want this ministry to end without thanking you for..”

2. Tell one specific story

Describe:

- what happened;
- where or when it happened;
- what the person did;
- what made the moment memorable.

Specific stories communicate more than broad praise.

Compare:

Thank you for being a wonderful pastor.

with:

When my mother entered hospice, you came to our home and sat with us at the kitchen table. You did not try to explain what was happening. You listened, prayed, and helped us feel less alone.

The second statement gives the gratitude somewhere to live.

3. Name what the story meant

Examples:

- “Your presence helped us feel less alone.”
- “That conversation changed how I understood faith.”
- “You trusted me with leadership before I trusted myself.”
- “I began to believe there might still be a place for me in the Church.”
- “Your willingness to acknowledge the mistake helped us continue working together.”
- “I learned something about courage by watching you.”
- “The ministry became possible because you kept showing up.”

4. End with gratitude or blessing

Examples:

- “Thank you for being present in that moment.”
 - “Thank you for the ministry we shared.”
 - “I will carry this memory with gratitude.”
 - “I am grateful that our paths crossed during these years.”
 - “May God bless you in the life ahead.”
 - “Go with my gratitude and prayers.”
 - “Thank you, and goodbye.”
-

Part Four — Gratitude Note Worksheet

Writer: _____

Recipient: _____

Why am I writing?

The particular moment or gift I want to name:

What happened:

What it meant to me:

What I want to thank the person for:

The blessing or goodbye I want to offer:

Boundary review

Before sending the note, ask:

- ☐ Am I expressing gratitude without asking for continued pastoral care?
- ☐ Have I avoided requesting a promise about future contact?
- ☐ Does the story reveal private information about someone else?
- ☐ If it does, do I have permission to include it?
- ☐ Am I asking the recipient to resolve something for me?
- ☐ Can the recipient receive this letter without being required to respond?
- ☐ Is every statement honest?

Part Five — Sample Letter from a Member to the Pastor

Dear **[pastor's name]**,

As your ministry with us comes to an end, I want to thank you for something I have never forgotten.

When **[briefly describe the situation]**, you **[describe what the pastor did]**.

What I remember most is **[specific detail]**.

Your presence did not remove the difficulty, but it helped me understand that I did not have to face it alone. I experienced God's care through the way you listened, prayed, and remained with us.

I know that this was one moment within many years of ministry. For me, it became one of the moments that mattered most.

Thank you for **[name the gift or action]**.

I am grateful that you were my pastor during that season of my life. I will carry this memory with me.

May God bless you in the life ahead.

With gratitude,

[Name]

Part Six — Sample Note About a Sermon or Teaching

Dear **[pastor's name]**,

Before you leave, I want to thank you for something you may not remember.

On **[date, season, or occasion]**, you preached or taught about **[subject]**. At the time, I was **[brief description of the writer's situation]**.

One sentence stayed with me:

[Quotation, if remembered accurately, or a brief paraphrase]

That message helped me **[describe its effect]**.

Pastors rarely know what happens after a sermon leaves the pulpit. I want you to know that this one remained with me.

Thank you for the care you gave to preaching and teaching among us.

With gratitude,

[Name]

Part Seven — Sample Note About Pastoral Care

Dear **[pastor's name]**,

I have been remembering the time when **[person or family]** experienced **[illness, death, crisis, or other circumstance]**.

You came to **[place]** and **[describe the pastor's presence or action]**.

I do not remember everything that was said. I remember that you were there.

Your presence helped us feel accompanied during a time when very little could be fixed or explained.

Thank you for the prayers, patience, and care you offered our family. We will remember them.

With gratitude,

[Name or family]

Part Eight — Sample Note About Leadership and Encouragement

Dear **[pastor's name]**,

Thank you for seeing gifts in me before I knew how to name them.

When you asked me to **[lead, teach, serve, participate, or accept responsibility]**, my first response was **[brief description]**.

You encouraged me by **[specific action or words]**.

Through that experience, I discovered **[what the writer learned or became able to do]**.

I know that leadership develops through the work of many people, but your encouragement opened a door I might not have entered on my own.

Thank you for trusting me and for helping me grow.

With gratitude,

[Name]

Part Nine — Sample Note Within a Complicated Relationship

A gratitude letter does not need to describe the entire relationship as positive. It may name one true gift within a more complicated story.

Dear **[pastor's name]**,

As your ministry with this congregation comes to an end, I have been thinking about what I want to say.

Our relationship was not always easy. We disagreed about **[name the subject only if appropriate]**, and there were parts of these years that were difficult for me.

I do not want that difficulty to erase something for which I remain grateful.

When **[describe a particular moment]**, you **[describe what the pastor did]**. Your response mattered because **[explain why]**.

I remain grateful for that moment and for **[specific gift or contribution]**.

I do not expect this letter to resolve everything we experienced. I simply want to tell the truth about this part of the story and say thank you.

I wish you peace in the life ahead.

Sincerely,

[Name]

Part Ten — Sample Note from the Pastor to a Member

Dear **[name]**,

As I prepare to leave **[congregation name]**, I want to thank you for the part you have played in my ministry.

I especially remember **[describe a particular experience, conversation, act of service, or season]**.

You brought **[name the person's gift]** to the congregation. Through your service, I learned **[what the pastor received or learned]**.

Pastors are often thanked for ministries that depend upon the faithfulness of many people. **[Name the ministry or responsibility]** could not have happened without you.

Thank you for your trust, your work, and the ways you helped shape me as a pastor.

I am grateful that we shared this season of ministry.

Grace and peace,

[Pastor's name]

Part Eleven — Sample Letter from the Pastor to the Congregation

Dear members and friends of **[congregation name]**,

As my ministry with you approaches its conclusion, I have received many generous expressions of gratitude.

I want to offer my gratitude in return.

Thank you for trusting me with your stories and inviting me into your lives.

Thank you for allowing me to stand beside you at baptisms, weddings, hospital beds, gravesides, celebrations, and moments of uncertainty.

Thank you for listening to sermons that were still becoming clear as I preached them.

Thank you for asking difficult questions and for telling me the truth.

Thank you for serving Christ through worship, teaching, care, generosity, leadership, mission, hospitality, and ordinary acts of faithfulness.

Thank you for the ways you forgave my mistakes and remained in relationship when ministry was difficult.

Thank you for what you taught me about **[name something particular to the congregation]**.

Whatever good happened during these years did not belong to the pastor alone. It emerged through the ministry we shared and through the grace of God at work among us.

I leave this congregation as a different pastor and a different person because of what we have experienced together.

Thank you for the privilege of being your pastor.

With gratitude,

[Pastor's name]

Part Twelve — Sample Letter from the Pastor to Staff

Dear **[name or staff colleagues]**,

Before my ministry here ends, I want to thank you for the work we have shared.

We have planned worship, responded to crises, prepared for meetings, solved problems, carried confidential concerns, navigated changes, and attended to responsibilities that many people never saw.

I especially want to thank you for **[specific contribution, gift, or moment]**.

Your work made my ministry better. You brought knowledge, judgment, patience, creativity, and faithfulness that I could not have supplied on my own.

I also recognize that **[if appropriate, acknowledge a failure or difficulty briefly and honestly]**.

Thank you for continuing to serve through both rewarding and difficult seasons.

As I leave, you are not responsible for preserving my ministry exactly as it has been. You are free to bring your gifts to the ministry and leadership that continue.

I am grateful that we were colleagues.

With respect and gratitude,

[Pastor's name]

Part Thirteen — Sample Note from Staff to the Pastor

Dear **[pastor's name]**,

Thank you for the work we have shared during these years.

I especially remember **[specific event, project, crisis, or ordinary experience]**.

Working with you taught me **[what the staff member learned]**.

I appreciated the way you **[specific leadership or collegial practice]**.

There were demanding seasons, and our work was not always easy. Still, I am grateful for **[specific truth about the relationship or shared ministry]**.

Thank you for the trust you placed in me and for the contribution you made to my work and vocation.

I wish you grace and peace in what comes next.

With gratitude,

[Name]

Part Fourteen — Sample Note to a Congregational Leader or Volunteer

Dear **[name]**,

As our congregation prepares for this pastoral transition, I want to thank you for the ministry you have offered.

Your work as **[role or contribution]** has often happened quietly. You have **[describe specific acts of service]**.

Because of your faithfulness, **[describe what became possible or who was served]**.

A shared ministry depends upon people who continue showing up, accepting responsibility, caring for others, and doing work that may never receive public attention.

Thank you for what you have given to this congregation.

With gratitude,

[Name]

Part Fifteen — Sample Note to a Community or Ministry Partner

Dear **[name]**,

As **[pastor's name]**'s ministry with **[congregation name]** comes to an end, we want to thank you for the partnership we have shared through **[ministry, project, organization, or relationship]**.

Together, we have **[brief description of shared work]**.

Your organization has brought **[name the contribution]**, and our congregation has been changed by what we learned through serving alongside you.

Thank you for your trust, cooperation, and commitment to our community.

Although one pastoral relationship is ending, we remain grateful for the work we have shared and for the relationships that have grown through it.

With gratitude,

[Name and role]

[Congregation name]

Part Sixteen — Sample Note from a Child or Young Person

Dear **[pastor's name]**,

I remember when you _____

You taught me _____

You made me laugh when _____

My favorite thing we did at church was _____

Thank you for _____

I hope you _____

From,

[Name]

A drawing or photograph may be included with appropriate permission.

Part Seventeen — Very Brief Notes

A meaningful note may be only a few sentences.

Brief note of gratitude

Dear **[name]**,

Thank you for **[specific gift or action]**.

It mattered to me because **[brief explanation]**.

I am grateful that we shared these years.

[Name]

Brief note about a memory

Dear **[name]**,

I still remember **[specific moment]**.

Your **[presence, words, action, or care]** helped me **[effect]**.

Thank you.

[Name]

Brief note within a complicated relationship

Dear **[name]**,

Although our relationship was sometimes difficult, I remain grateful for **[specific truth]**.

I wanted to name that honestly before we say goodbye.

I wish you peace.

[Name]

Brief blessing

Dear **[name]**,

Thank you for the ministry we shared.

May God bless you with rest, courage, good companions, and grace for the road ahead.

Go in peace.

[Name]

Part Eighteen — What to Avoid

Avoid exaggerated praise

Instead of:

You were the greatest pastor this congregation has ever had.

Consider:

Your care for people during illness and loss became one of the gifts of your ministry among us.

Instead of:

Everything changed because of you.

Consider:

Your leadership helped us begin a ministry that continues to matter in our community.

Avoid making the pastor indispensable

Instead of:

We do not know how we will survive without you.

Consider:

We will miss your presence and remain grateful for what you helped us learn.

Instead of:

No one will ever be able to replace you.

Consider:

No future relationship will be identical to the one we have shared.

Avoid promises or requests about future contact

Instead of:

Promise you will always be available when we need you.

Consider:

Thank you for the care you offered while you were our pastor.

Instead of:

You must come back for my daughter's wedding.

Consider:

We remain grateful that you baptized our daughter and shared these years with our family.

Avoid requiring a response

Instead of:

Please write and tell me what our relationship will be after you leave.

Consider:

I offer this gratitude without expecting a response.

Avoid using gratitude to conceal hurt

Instead of writing something untrue, name one honest gift—or choose not to write.

A gratitude letter does not require a complete account of the relationship.

Part Nineteen — Privacy and Permission

Before sharing a letter publicly, confirm:

- ☐ The writer has given permission.
- ☐ The recipient knows the letter may be shared.
- ☐ The letter does not reveal confidential pastoral information.
- ☐ The letter does not disclose another person's health, family, financial, or personal circumstances without permission.
- ☐ Names, dates, and events are accurate.
- ☐ A child or young person has appropriate adult permission.
- ☐ The letter will not be published beyond the permission given.

A letter written directly to the pastor or another person should be presumed private unless the writer explicitly authorizes another use.

Part Twenty — Organizing a Congregational Letter Collection**Coordinator**

Name: _____

Submission deadline

Date: _____

Submission methods

- ☐ Handwritten note
- ☐ Printed letter
- ☐ Email
- ☐ Online form
- ☐ Children's artwork

☐ Photograph with caption

☐ Other: _____

Collection format

☐ Binder

☐ Bound book

☐ Box of individual letters

☐ Digital collection

☐ Printed album

☐ Other: _____

Review responsibilities

☐ Confirm permission

☐ Protect private information

☐ Check names and spelling

☐ Remove accidental duplicates

☐ Preserve the writer's voice

☐ Avoid correcting personal letters merely for stylistic consistency

☐ Include contributions from people unable to attend farewell events

☐ Include letters from the pastor to the congregation, when appropriate

Presentation

Who will present the collection?

When will it be presented?

Will any letters be read publicly?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, who will obtain permission?

Final Review

Before sending or presenting a gratitude letter, ask:

- ☐ Is it specific?
 - ☐ Is it honest?
 - ☐ Does it name a gift or moment rather than offering only general praise?
 - ☐ Does it respect the complexity of the relationship?
 - ☐ Does it avoid comparison with other pastors?
 - ☐ Does it avoid promises or requests about future contact?
 - ☐ Does it protect private information?
 - ☐ Can the recipient receive it without being required to respond?
 - ☐ Does it say what should not be left unsaid?
-

Gratitude does not require anyone to pretend that the ministry was perfect.

It asks us to notice what was given, name the grace received, and offer thanks before goodbye.

FM 5.1 — Ending Well Roles and Responsibilities Worksheet

Use with: *Ending Well*, Chapter Five — “The Pastor’s Work of Leaving”

Also supports:

- Chapter Six — “Leaving Staff Relationships Well”
- Chapter Seven — “The Congregation’s Work of Letting Go”

Purpose

When a pastor leaves, responsibility changes hands.

For years, the pastor may have preached, moderated meetings, supervised staff, coordinated pastoral care, represented the congregation in the community, interpreted denominational requirements, managed conflict, and carried institutional knowledge that was never formally assigned.

Those responsibilities do not all pass to one person.

Some belong to the departing pastor to complete.

Some should be transferred.

Some belong to the governing body.

Some belong to staff.

Some require temporary pastoral or denominational leadership.

Some should be paused.

Some may no longer need to be done.

This worksheet helps pastor and congregational leaders:

- identify the work currently carried by the pastor;
- determine what must be completed before departure;
- assign responsibility for the ending;
- clarify authority after the pastor leaves;
- protect staff from silently inheriting inappropriate responsibilities;
- distinguish information handoff from control of the congregation’s future;
- recognize what should remain unfinished.

Use this worksheet early enough for decisions to be made and communicated before the final Sunday.

For detailed handoff information, use:

- **FM 5.2 — Pastor’s Handoff Worksheet**
- **FM 6.1 — Staff Transition and Handoff Worksheet**

Part One — Record the Transition

Pastor: _____

Congregation: _____

Pastor's title: _____

Final Sunday: _____

Final working day: _____

Official end of the pastoral relationship: _____

Date this worksheet is being completed: _____

Date responsibilities will transfer: _____

Governing-body coordinator: _____

Denominational representative: _____

Temporary pastoral leader, if known: _____

Part Two — Define the Responsibility Terms

Use the following terms consistently throughout this worksheet.

Complete

The departing pastor finishes the responsibility before departure.

Transfer

Responsibility moves to a named person or body.

Share temporarily

Two or more people carry the responsibility during a defined period.

Pause

The responsibility stops temporarily until appropriate leadership is available.

End

The responsibility is no longer needed or should not continue.

Leave unfinished

The matter remains open because it belongs to future leadership, cannot be completed responsibly, or should not be decided during the ending.

Escalate

The matter requires action by the governing body, denominational authority, personnel committee, legal counsel, or another appropriate body.

Part Three — Identify the Decision Makers

Before assigning individual tasks, clarify who has authority.

Governing body

Name of governing body:

Who convenes or moderates it before the pastor leaves?

Who will convene or moderate it after departure?

Who may call special meetings?

Who maintains the official record of decisions?

Staff

Who supervises staff before departure?

Who supervises staff after departure?

Who approves staff leave and schedules?

Who conducts personnel conversations?

Who resolves uncertainty about staff responsibilities?

Financial authority

Who approves expenditures before departure?

Who approves expenditures after departure?

Who signs checks or authorizes payments?

Who approves emergency expenses?

Pastoral care

Who coordinates pastoral care before departure?

Who coordinates pastoral care after departure?

Who receives emergency pastoral-care calls?

Worship

Who plans worship before departure?

Who plans worship after departure?

Who secures preachers or worship leaders?

Communication

Who speaks officially for the congregation?

Who communicates decisions to staff?

Who communicates with the congregation?

Who communicates with the denominational body?

Part Four — Assign the Work of Ending

For each area, name:

- the person with primary responsibility;
- anyone assisting;
- the completion date;
- the current status.

Suggested status terms:

- Not begun
- In progress
- Waiting for information
- Completed
- Transferred
- Paused
- Intentionally unfinished
- No longer needed

1. Departure communication

Responsibility	Primary Person	Assisting or Consulted	Due Date	Status
Consult denominational leadership				
Inform the governing body				
Inform staff				
Prepare the pastor's letter				
Prepare the governing body's letter				

Responsibility	Primary Person	Assisting or Consulted	Due Date	Status
Announce the departure				
Communicate with absent and homebound members				
Communicate with community partners				
Update website and social media				
Respond to questions and misinformation				

Use with:

- **FM 1.2 — Departure Communication Planner**
- **FM 1.3 — Pastoral Departure Letter Samples**

2. Master timeline

Responsibility	Primary Person	Assisting or Consulted	Due Date	Status
Establish major dates				
Maintain the master timeline				
Schedule planning meetings				
Monitor assigned responsibilities				
Confirm completion before final Sunday				
Coordinate immediate post-departure work				

Use with:

- **FM 1.1 — Ending Well Timeline and Completion Checklist**

3. Pastor's handoff

Responsibility	Primary Person	Assisting or Consulted	Due Date	Status
Identify active responsibilities				
Review pastoral-care needs				
Document current commitments				
Organize important records				
Document community relationships				
Document denominational relationships				

Responsibility	Primary Person	Assisting or Consulted	Due Date	Status
Transfer calendars and deadlines				
Transfer keys, accounts, and access				
Identify intentionally unfinished work				
Receive and secure handoff materials				

Use with:

- **FM 5.2 — Pastor's Handoff Worksheet**
-

4. Staff transition

Responsibility	Primary Person	Assisting or Consulted	Due Date	Status
Communicate directly with staff				
Name the next supervisor				
Clarify decision-making authority				
Review workload changes				
Identify work that should not transfer to staff				
Gather staff institutional knowledge				
Clarify personnel questions				
Plan a staff closing conversation				
Transfer head-of-staff authority				
Establish post-departure staff communication				

Use with:

- **FM 6.1 — Staff Transition and Handoff Worksheet**
-

5. Personal goodbyes

Responsibility	Primary Person	Assisting or Consulted	Due Date	Status
Identify relationships warranting an intentional goodbye				
Establish realistic limits				
Schedule necessary conversations				

Responsibility	Primary Person	Assisting or Consulted	Due Date	Status
Prepare personal notes or letters				
Arrange contact with homebound members				
Identify relationships needing an apology or acknowledgment				
Protect the pastor's time and energy				

Use with:

- **FM 5.3 — Personal Goodbye Planner for the Departing Pastor**

6. Gratitude and stories

Responsibility	Primary Person	Assisting or Consulted	Due Date	Status
Invite congregational stories				
Collect letters and notes				
Confirm permission for public use				
Recognize staff contributions				
Recognize lay leadership				
Prepare a collection for the pastor				
Provide selected material to farewell planners				
Provide selected material to worship planners				

Use with:

- **FM 2.1 — Gratitude, Stories, and Honest Remembering Guide**
- **FM 2.2 — Mutual Gratitude Letters and Notes**

7. Boundaries

Responsibility	Primary Person	Assisting or Consulted	Due Date	Status
Review denominational expectations				
Conduct pastor–governing body conversation				
Discuss pastoral care after departure				
Discuss weddings and funerals				

Responsibility	Primary Person	Assisting or Consulted	Due Date	Status
Discuss worship attendance and return visits				
Discuss friendship and informal contact				
Discuss staff contact				
Discuss social media				
Communicate expectations to congregation				
Identify who handles future boundary questions				

Use with:

- **FM 8.1 — Boundary Conversation Guide and Scenarios**

8. Farewell celebration

Responsibility	Primary Person	Assisting or Consulted	Due Date	Status
Establish date, time, and location				
Determine budget				
Invite participants				
Coordinate stories and speakers				
Plan hospitality				
Consider accessibility				
Include the pastor's family appropriately				
Coordinate gifts				
Communicate event details				
Arrange setup and cleanup				

Use with:

- **FM 9.1 — Farewell Celebration Planner**

9. Final worship

Responsibility	Primary Person	Assisting or Consulted	Due Date	Status
Establish service structure				

Responsibility	Primary Person	Assisting or Consulted	Due Date	Status
Select Scripture				
Select music				
Coordinate worship leadership				
Determine communion plans, if applicable				
Prepare prayers of thanksgiving				
Prepare words of release				
Prepare blessings				
Confirm participation by denominational leaders				
Prepare bulletin or worship materials				

Use with:

- **FM 9.2 — Final Worship: Thanksgiving, Release, and Blessing**

10. Immediate post-departure arrangements

Responsibility	Primary Person	Assisting or Consulted	Effective Date	Status
Activate temporary pastoral leadership				
Activate pastoral-care coverage				
Activate staff supervision				
Confirm worship leadership				
Confirm governing-body leadership				
Transfer emergency contacts				
Update website, voicemail, and directories				
Redirect pastoral requests				
Remove former pastoral access				
Communicate immediate arrangements				

Use with:

- **FM 7.1 — Immediate Post-Departure Start-Up Checklist**

Part Five — Identify What the Pastor Currently Carries

Many responsibilities are not visible until the pastor stops carrying them.

Work through each category and record what the pastor actually does—not only what the job description says.

Worship

- ☐ Preaching
- ☐ Worship planning
- ☐ Selecting Scripture
- ☐ Selecting hymns or music
- ☐ Preparing liturgy
- ☐ Presiding at communion
- ☐ Coordinating worship participants
- ☐ Approving bulletins
- ☐ Scheduling guest leaders
- ☐ Managing worship emergencies
- ☐ Other: _____

Pastoral care

- ☐ Hospital visits
- ☐ Homebound visits
- ☐ Crisis response
- ☐ Funeral planning
- ☐ Grief care
- ☐ Marriage preparation
- ☐ Counseling or pastoral conversation
- ☐ Prayer requests
- ☐ Emergency telephone coverage
- ☐ Referrals to professional care
- ☐ Other: _____

Governance and leadership

- ☐ Moderating or convening meetings
- ☐ Preparing agendas
- ☐ Interpreting policy
- ☐ Coordinating committees
- ☐ Following up on decisions
- ☐ Managing conflict
- ☐ Communicating decisions
- ☐ Maintaining denominational relationships
- ☐ Other: _____

Staff

- ☐ Supervision
- ☐ Work assignments
- ☐ Performance conversations
- ☐ Conflict management
- ☐ Leave approval
- ☐ Schedule coordination
- ☐ Staff meetings
- ☐ Hiring or search participation
- ☐ Personnel documentation
- ☐ Other: _____

Administration

- ☐ Calendar management
- ☐ Building access
- ☐ Account access
- ☐ Contract approval
- ☐ Financial authorization

- ☐ Records
- ☐ Technology systems
- ☐ Emergency procedures
- ☐ Insurance or risk-management contact
- ☐ Other: _____

Congregational communication

- ☐ Weekly newsletter
- ☐ Congregational emails
- ☐ Website content
- ☐ Social media
- ☐ Announcements
- ☐ Crisis communication
- ☐ Community relations
- ☐ Other: _____

Community and denominational relationships

- ☐ Presbytery or denominational service
- ☐ Ecumenical relationships
- ☐ School or nonprofit partnerships
- ☐ Funeral-home relationships
- ☐ Hospital or care-facility relationships
- ☐ Civic organizations
- ☐ Community events
- ☐ Other: _____

Informal and invisible work

- ☐ Knowing whom to call when something breaks
- ☐ Remembering annual deadlines
- ☐ Managing informal conflicts

- ☐ Carrying information not recorded elsewhere
- ☐ Connecting people across ministries
- ☐ Reminding others of responsibilities
- ☐ Providing unofficial approval
- ☐ Solving problems before they become visible
- ☐ Maintaining relationships through personal contact
- ☐ Other: _____
-

Part Six — Decide What Happens to Each Pastoral Responsibility

Current Responsibility	Current Frequency	Complete	Transfer	Share	Pause	End	Leave Unfinished	New Responsible Person or Body	Effective Date
		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐		
		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐		
		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐		
		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐		
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		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐		
		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐		
		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐		

Part Seven — Test Every Transfer

Before transferring a responsibility, ask the following.

Authority

- Does the person or body have authority to carry this responsibility?
- Is formal action required?
- Does the denomination need to approve or appoint someone?
- Does the congregation need to be informed?

Capacity

- Does the person have time to do this work?
- What current responsibility may need to be reduced?
- Is this becoming unpaid work that previously belonged to a compensated role?
- Is the responsibility being assigned simply because the person is competent and nearby?

Information

- What information is needed?
- Where is that information currently kept?
- Does the transfer include confidential information?
- How will confidential material be protected?

Duration

- Is the transfer temporary or permanent?
- When will it be reviewed?
- What event ends the temporary arrangement?

Support

- Who answers questions?
- Who provides oversight?
- What happens when the person is unavailable?
- What resources or training are needed?

Communication

- Who needs to know that the responsibility has changed?
 - What should the congregation expect?
 - Where should future requests be directed?
-

Part Eight — Protect Staff from Inappropriate Transfer

A pastor's departure can expose work that has quietly accumulated around the pastoral role. That work should not automatically be deposited on staff.

For every proposed staff assignment, ask:

- ☐ Does this responsibility belong within the staff member's job description?
- ☐ Does the staff member have authority to carry it?
- ☐ Does the staff member have the time and capacity?
- ☐ What existing work will be reduced?
- ☐ Is additional compensation appropriate?

- ☐ Does the governing body need to approve the assignment?
- ☐ Is the assignment temporary?
- ☐ When will it be reviewed?
- ☐ Who supervises the work?
- ☐ Has the staff member been consulted rather than merely informed?
- ☐ Would this responsibility more appropriately belong to the governing body?
- ☐ Would it more appropriately belong to temporary pastoral leadership?
- ☐ Should the work pause instead?

Staff responsibilities requiring review

Proposed Responsibility	Staff Member	Why This Person	Existing Work Affected	Authority Needed	Review Date	Approved By

Part Nine — Decisions the Departing Pastor Should Complete

The pastor should not withdraw from appropriate leadership simply because departure has been announced.

A decision may still belong to the departing pastor when:

- ☐ It concerns ministry before the pastor's final day.
- ☐ The pastor has the appropriate authority.
- ☐ The decision cannot responsibly wait.
- ☐ Others are depending upon a commitment already made.
- ☐ Delay would create unnecessary harm or confusion.
- ☐ The decision is part of ordinary pastoral responsibility.
- ☐ The pastor will be present to carry out or explain the decision.

Decisions or responsibilities the pastor should complete

Matter	Why It Belongs to the Pastor	Required Consultation	Completion Date

Part Ten — Decisions the Departing Pastor Should Usually Release

A decision may belong to others when:

- ☐ Its consequences will be experienced primarily after the pastor leaves.
- ☐ It concerns the congregation's future direction.
- ☐ It would bind future pastoral leadership unnecessarily.
- ☐ It involves reorganizing staff for the next season.
- ☐ It concerns the selection of temporary or future pastoral leadership.
- ☐ It would preserve a ministry primarily because the departing pastor values it.
- ☐ It can responsibly wait.
- ☐ Appropriate leaders need the opportunity to exercise their authority.

Decisions or responsibilities to release

Matter	Why It Belongs to Others	Person or Body Receiving It	Information Needed from Pastor
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Part Eleven — Responsibilities That May End

A transition is an opportunity to recognize work that continues only because it has always been done.

Before transferring every responsibility, ask:

- Does this work still serve a clear purpose?
- Is anyone relying upon it?
- Is it required?
- Would anyone choose to begin it today?
- What would happen if it stopped?
- Is the work being preserved to protect the departing pastor's legacy?
- Does another activity accomplish the same purpose?
- Is this the right time to let it end?

Responsibilities recommended to end

Responsibility	Reason to End	Who Must Approve	Who Must Be Informed	End Date
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Part Twelve — Responsibilities That Will Remain Unfinished

Some responsibilities should remain unfinished because they belong to future leadership, require more time, depend upon unresolved information, or cannot be completed responsibly before departure.

Intentionally unfinished matters

Matter	Why It Will Remain Unfinished	Information to Preserve	Person or Body Receiving It
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Before leaving something unfinished

Confirm:

- ☐ The matter has been named clearly.
 - ☐ The appropriate person or body knows it remains open.
 - ☐ Necessary information has been preserved.
 - ☐ No one has been led to believe it was completed.
 - ☐ The departing pastor has not left a hidden expectation about the outcome.
 - ☐ The matter can wait without causing harm.
-

Part Thirteen — Define the Transition Moment

Responsibility should transfer at a clearly identified time.

The pastor's authority ends:

Date: _____

Time or event: _____

On that date:

- ☐ The pastor no longer supervises staff.
- ☐ The pastor no longer moderates or convenes the governing body.
- ☐ The pastor no longer authorizes expenditures.
- ☐ The pastor no longer directs pastoral care.
- ☐ The pastor no longer makes congregational decisions.
- ☐ The pastor no longer speaks officially for the congregation.
- ☐ The pastor no longer has administrative or confidential access except as specifically authorized.
- ☐ Emergency requests are redirected.

☐ Staff and leaders know who holds each responsibility.

☐ The congregation has been informed.

Exceptions required by formal agreement

Approved by: _____

End date for exception: _____

Part Fourteen — Communication Plan for Transferred Responsibilities

Members should not have to discover new arrangements during a crisis.

The congregation needs to know:

- ☐ Who provides pastoral care
- ☐ Who responds to emergencies
- ☐ Who leads worship
- ☐ Who supervises staff
- ☐ Who leads the governing body
- ☐ Who communicates official decisions
- ☐ Where questions should be directed
- ☐ Which activities are paused
- ☐ Which responsibilities have ended

Communication record

Information	Audience	Communicator	Method	Date
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Part Fifteen — Final Responsibility Review

Complete this review shortly before the pastor's final working day.

Authority

- ☐ The governing body knows who holds authority after departure.
- ☐ Staff supervision is clear.
- ☐ Financial authority is clear.
- ☐ Pastoral-care coordination is clear.
- ☐ Worship leadership is clear.
- ☐ Official communication authority is clear.

Work

- ☐ Every significant pastoral responsibility has been reviewed.
- ☐ Each responsibility has been completed, transferred, shared, paused, ended, or intentionally left unfinished.
- ☐ No significant work has been assigned only through assumption.
- ☐ Staff have been consulted about responsibilities affecting them.
- ☐ Temporary assignments have review dates.

Information

- ☐ Handoff materials are complete enough for those who remain.
- ☐ Confidential information has been transferred securely.
- ☐ Important dates and commitments have been documented.
- ☐ Community and denominational contacts are known.
- ☐ Keys, accounts, records, and administrative access have been addressed.

Relationships

- ☐ The pastor has not recruited others to preserve a personal legacy.
- ☐ Staff are free to serve the ministry that continues.
- ☐ Governing-body members understand that future decisions belong to them.
- ☐ The pastor is no longer expected to remain available as a backup decision maker.

Communication

- ☐ Staff know what is changing.
- ☐ Congregational leaders know what is changing.

- ☐ The congregation knows where to direct pastoral requests.
 - ☐ The congregation knows where to direct administrative questions.
 - ☐ Emergency arrangements are clear.
-

Responsibility Summary

What the pastor will complete

What will transfer to the governing body

What will transfer to temporary pastoral leadership

What will transfer to staff

What will pause

What will end

What will remain unfinished

What requires denominational or other outside action

Sign-Off

This sign-off confirms shared understanding. It does not replace any formal action required by the congregation, employer, governing body, or denomination.

Departing pastor: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Governing-body representative: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Staff supervisor after departure: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Denominational representative, if appropriate: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

The pastor does not need to finish everything.

Pastor and congregation do need to know what belongs to the pastor, what belongs to those who remain, what must be transferred, and what may be released.

FM 5.2 — Pastor's Handoff Worksheet

Use with: *Ending Well*, Chapter Five — “The Pastor’s Work of Leaving”

Also supports:

- Chapter Six — “Leaving Staff Relationships Well”
- Chapter Seven — “The Congregation’s Work of Letting Go”

Purpose

Every pastor carries knowledge that meeting minutes, job descriptions, calendars, and official records do not contain.

The pastor may know:

- which pastoral-care situations require continuing attention;
- what commitments have already been made;
- which responsibilities depend upon informal arrangements;
- who maintains important community relationships;
- where records and resources are kept;
- which annual events require preparation long before they occur;
- what work is underway;
- what remains unresolved;
- which matters should be completed and which should be left to others.

A faithful handoff gives appropriate leaders the information they need without attempting to control what they will do with it.

This worksheet helps the departing pastor:

- identify information that must be transferred;
- document active responsibilities and commitments;
- provide continuity for pastoral care, worship, administration, staff, and community relationships;
- distinguish helpful history from instructions for the future;
- protect confidential information;
- identify deliberately unfinished work;
- relinquish responsibility when the handoff is complete.

This worksheet does not replace denominational, legal, personnel, records-management, or safeguarding requirements.

Use it with:

- **FM 5.1 — Ending Well Roles and Responsibilities Worksheet**
- **FM 6.1 — Staff Transition and Handoff Worksheet**

Part One — Handoff Information

Departing pastor: _____

Congregation: _____

Pastor's title: _____

Final Sunday: _____

Final working day: _____

Official end of the pastoral relationship: _____

Date handoff begins: _____

Date handoff should be completed: _____

Primary person receiving the handoff

Name: _____

Role: _____

Contact information: _____

Others authorized to receive portions of the handoff

Name	Role	Information Authorized
------	------	------------------------

Handoff format

☐ Written documents

☐ Secure digital files

☐ In-person meeting

☐ Video meeting

☐ Telephone conversation

☐ Tour of facilities or records

☐ Introductions to key contacts

☐ Other: _____

Part Two — Handoff Principles

Before preparing the handoff, pastor and congregational leaders should agree on the following.

The departing pastor will:

- ☐ Provide accurate information
- ☐ Distinguish fact from interpretation
- ☐ Identify current responsibilities and commitments
- ☐ Protect confidential information
- ☐ Explain relevant history without requiring others to preserve existing practices
- ☐ Name uncertainty rather than pretending to know
- ☐ Identify unfinished matters clearly
- ☐ Transfer information to authorized people
- ☐ Avoid using the handoff to influence future pastoral selection
- ☐ Avoid recruiting leaders or staff to preserve the pastor's legacy
- ☐ Relinquish responsibility after the handoff

Those receiving the handoff will:

- ☐ Review the information
- ☐ Ask necessary clarifying questions
- ☐ Protect confidential material
- ☐ Confirm who now holds each responsibility
- ☐ Decide what continues, changes, pauses, or ends
- ☐ Avoid treating the handoff as instructions that bind future leadership
- ☐ Identify missing information before the pastor leaves
- ☐ Store records appropriately

Governing principle

A good handoff says:

Here is what you need to know.

It does not say:

Here is what you must do after I am gone.

Part Three — Protect Confidential Information

Pastoral handoff requires particular care because pastors receive information through relationships of trust.

Do not place unrestricted pastoral-care information in a general transition file.

Do not transfer personal information merely because it may be interesting or useful.

Transfer only what is necessary for appropriate continuing care, safeguarding, legal compliance, or congregational responsibility.

Before transferring confidential information, ask:

- Does the recipient have a legitimate pastoral or organizational need to know?
- Is the recipient authorized to receive it?
- Is the information necessary for care or responsibility?
- Has the person receiving care consented when consent is appropriate?
- Does denominational policy require a particular process?
- Does the information involve abuse, danger, safeguarding, or mandatory reporting?
- Is legal or professional guidance needed?
- Can the information be transferred more securely in conversation than in writing?
- How will the information be stored?
- When should it be destroyed or reviewed?

Do not include in a general handoff file:

- ☐ Detailed counseling notes
- ☐ Unverified allegations
- ☐ Personal opinions about members
- ☐ Private information unrelated to continuing care
- ☐ Confessions or disclosures that should remain protected
- ☐ Health information beyond what is necessary and authorized
- ☐ Family information shared in confidence
- ☐ Personnel information outside the authorized personnel process
- ☐ Speculation about motives or relationships
- ☐ Information intended to prejudice future leaders against particular people

Confidential handoff arrangements

Who receives confidential pastoral-care information?

How will it be transferred?

Where will it be stored?

Who will have access?

What policy governs retention or destruction?

Who will advise on safeguarding or mandatory reporting?

Part Four — Active Pastoral-Care Handoff

Record only the minimum information necessary for appropriate continuing care.

Use a secure process approved by the congregation and denomination.

Person or Household	Current Need	Immediate Action Required	Existing Contact or Care	Person Receiving Responsibility	Permission or Confidentiality Notes
---------------------	--------------	---------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------------------	-------------------------------------

Review these areas

- ☐ Hospitalization
- ☐ Hospice or end-of-life care
- ☐ Recent death or acute grief
- ☐ Serious illness
- ☐ Homebound members
- ☐ Members in care facilities
- ☐ Families in crisis
- ☐ Pending funerals or memorial services
- ☐ Upcoming weddings
- ☐ Baptism preparation
- ☐ People awaiting referral or follow-up

- ☐ Safeguarding concerns
- ☐ Court, legal, or mandatory-reporting matters
- ☐ People without a clear pastoral-care connection
- ☐ Other: _____

Emergency pastoral-care transition

Who receives calls before the pastor's final day?

Who receives calls after the pastor's final day?

When does the change take effect?

How will calls be redirected?

Who will inform people currently receiving care?

Part Five — Worship and Sacramental Responsibilities

Upcoming worship

Date	Service or Occasion	Preacher or Leader	Special Elements	Preparation Completed	Remaining Responsibility
------	---------------------	--------------------	------------------	-----------------------	--------------------------

Worship planning information

- ☐ Current worship-planning calendar
- ☐ Lectionary or sermon schedule
- ☐ Music-planning process
- ☐ Bulletin preparation process
- ☐ Worship-leader schedule
- ☐ Communion schedule

- ☐ Baptism plans
- ☐ Special services
- ☐ Seasonal traditions
- ☐ Audio, livestream, or technology responsibilities
- ☐ Accessibility arrangements
- ☐ Emergency worship procedures
- ☐ Other: _____

Communion and sacraments

Who has authority to preside after departure?

What denominational approvals are required?

Who prepares communion?

Where are sacramental records maintained?

Are baptisms or other sacramental events pending?

Funerals, weddings, and special services

Event	Date	Current Commitments	New Responsible Person	Information Transferred
-------	------	---------------------	------------------------	-------------------------

Do not assume that the departing pastor will return to conduct a wedding, funeral, baptism, or other service after the pastoral relationship ends.

Any exception should follow denominational policy, agreed boundaries, and the invitation or consent of current pastoral leadership.

Part Six — Governance and Leadership

Upcoming governing-body work

Meeting or Decision	Date	Pastor's Current Role	Preparation Needed	Responsibility After Departure
---------------------	------	-----------------------	--------------------	--------------------------------

Governance information to transfer

- ☐ Meeting calendar
- ☐ Agenda-preparation process
- ☐ Minutes and official records
- ☐ Current policies
- ☐ Current committee assignments
- ☐ Pending motions or decisions
- ☐ Required denominational reports
- ☐ Annual meeting requirements
- ☐ Terms of office
- ☐ Governance deadlines
- ☐ Current policy-review work
- ☐ Current conflict or disciplinary processes
- ☐ Other: _____

Moderation and leadership

Who currently convenes or moderates the governing body?

Who will do so after departure?

Effective date: _____

What formal action is required?

Pending decisions

Decision	Why It Is Pending	Who Has Authority	Information Needed	Recommended Timing
----------	-------------------	-------------------	--------------------	--------------------

The departing pastor may explain the history and current status of a decision. The handoff should not prescribe an outcome that properly belongs to those who remain.

Part Seven — Staff and Personnel

Detailed staff transition work belongs in FM 6.1 — Staff Transition and Handoff Worksheet

Use this section to identify the pastor's staff responsibilities and confirm where they will transfer.

Staff supervision

Staff Member	Role	Current Supervisor	Supervisor After Departure	Effective Date	Staff Member Informed
					☐
					☐
					☐
					☐

Personnel responsibilities to transfer

- ☐ Staff meetings
- ☐ Work assignments
- ☐ Leave approval
- ☐ Schedule approval
- ☐ Performance conversations
- ☐ Conflict response
- ☐ Timesheet approval
- ☐ Expense approval
- ☐ Personnel documentation
- ☐ Hiring or search processes
- ☐ Benefits communication
- ☐ Emergency contact

☐ Other: _____

Active personnel matters

Do not place confidential personnel information in this general worksheet.

Are there active personnel matters requiring authorized transfer?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

Who is authorized to receive them?

How will they be transferred securely?

What action or deadline is pending?

Part Eight — Programs, Ministries, and Projects

List active ministries for which the pastor currently provides leadership, approval, information, or informal support.

Ministry or Project	Pastor's Current Role	Current Leader or Team	Upcoming Deadline	Decision Needed	Responsibility After Departure
---------------------	-----------------------	------------------------	-------------------	-----------------	--------------------------------

For each ministry, decide:

- ☐ Continue
- ☐ Transfer
- ☐ Share temporarily
- ☐ Pause
- ☐ End
- ☐ Leave for later review

Ministry-transition questions

- Does this ministry have leadership beyond the pastor?
- Does it have a clear purpose?
- Is there an upcoming commitment?
- Does it require funding?
- Does it depend upon a relationship held primarily by the pastor?

- Is someone assuming it will continue without having accepted responsibility?
 - Would pausing be more responsible than transferring it?
 - Is the departing pastor trying to preserve it because of personal investment?
 - What information do those who remain actually need?
-

Part Nine — Calendar and Recurring Responsibilities

Many congregational responsibilities recur annually and may not be visible in current meeting records.

Annual and seasonal calendar

Month or Date	Event, Deadline, or Responsibility	Preparation Begins	Current Owner	New Owner	Notes
---------------	------------------------------------	--------------------	---------------	-----------	-------

Review for recurring work

- ☐ Advent and Christmas
- ☐ Lent and Holy Week
- ☐ Easter
- ☐ Pentecost
- ☐ Stewardship season
- ☐ Annual meeting
- ☐ Budget preparation
- ☐ Officer nomination and training
- ☐ Staff reviews
- ☐ Vacation and leave planning
- ☐ Confirmation
- ☐ Christian education year
- ☐ Community events
- ☐ Mission projects
- ☐ Denominational meetings and reports
- ☐ Insurance renewal
- ☐ Facility inspections

☐ Licensing or certification deadlines☐ Memorial observances☐ Other: _____

Part Ten — Congregational Commitments

A departing pastor may have made or received commitments on behalf of the congregation.

Current commitments

Commitment	Made To	Date or Deadline	Who Authorized It	Written Record	Person Receiving Responsibility
------------	---------	------------------	-------------------	----------------	---------------------------------

Review for:

☐ Weddings☐ Funerals or memorials☐ Baptisms☐ Membership preparation☐ Facility use☐ Community partnerships☐ Financial commitments☐ Guest preaching☐ Special worship☐ Counseling or pastoral meetings☐ Staff or volunteer commitments☐ Contracts☐ Travel☐ Denominational responsibilities☐ Other: _____

Do not assume a personal pastoral promise remains binding after the pastor's authority ends. Identify who has authority to confirm, revise, or decline each commitment.

Part Eleven — Records and Information

Official records

Record	Location	Person Responsible	Current Through	Action Needed
Membership records				
Baptism records				
Marriage records				
Funeral or memorial records				
Governing-body minutes				
Personnel records				
Financial records				
Property records				
Policy files				
Denominational reports				
Other:				

Pastor's working files

- ☐ Sermon files
- ☐ Worship resources
- ☐ Teaching materials
- ☐ Committee files
- ☐ Ministry-planning files
- ☐ Community-contact files
- ☐ Denominational files
- ☐ Personal files
- ☐ Confidential pastoral-care files
- ☐ Personnel files
- ☐ Electronic documents
- ☐ Email
- ☐ Paper records

For every file category, decide:

- ☐ Belongs to the congregation
- ☐ Belongs to the pastor
- ☐ Must be transferred
- ☐ Must be archived
- ☐ Must be retained for a required period
- ☐ Must be destroyed securely
- ☐ Requires denominational guidance
- ☐ Requires legal guidance

Do not remove congregational records that belong to the congregation.

Do not leave personal files or pastoral notes without an intentional decision about ownership, confidentiality, retention, and destruction.

Part Twelve — Keys, Property, Accounts, and Access**Physical property**

Item	Identifier or Location	Return To	Return Date	Completed
Building keys				☐
Office keys				☐
Vehicle keys				☐
Credit or purchasing cards				☐
Devices				☐
Books or equipment belonging to congregation				☐
Other:				☐

Digital access

Do not place passwords directly in an unrestricted handoff worksheet. Use the congregation's approved secure password-transfer process.

System or Account	Current Access	New Administrator	Transfer or Removal Date	Completed
Congregational email				☐
Website				☐

System or Account	Current Access	New Administrator	Transfer or Removal Date	Completed
Social media				☐
Membership database				☐
Financial system				☐
Cloud storage				☐
Calendar				☐
Livestream or media accounts				☐
Building-security system				☐
Telephone or voicemail				☐
Other:				☐

Confirm:

- ☐ Shared accounts have a new authorized administrator.
 - ☐ Multifactor authentication has been transferred.
 - ☐ Recovery email addresses and telephone numbers have been updated.
 - ☐ Personal accounts are not being transferred as congregational accounts.
 - ☐ Congregational information has been removed from personal devices where appropriate.
 - ☐ Automatic forwarding has an end date.
 - ☐ Former pastoral access will end promptly.
 - ☐ Necessary files have been preserved before access is removed.
-

Part Thirteen — Financial and Administrative Matters

The handoff should identify responsibilities and deadlines, not disclose confidential financial information to unauthorized people.

Financial responsibilities

Responsibility	Current Process	Current Authorized Person	New Authorized Person	Effective Date
Expense approval				
Check signing				
Purchasing				
Budget monitoring				
Staff reimbursements				

Responsibility	Current Process	Current Authorized Person	New Authorized Person	Effective Date
Benevolence requests				
Other:				

Administrative matters to confirm

- ☐ Final compensation
- ☐ Accrued leave
- ☐ Reimbursements
- ☐ Pension or retirement matters
- ☐ Health benefits
- ☐ Housing or manse arrangements
- ☐ Moving expenses
- ☐ Continuing-education funds
- ☐ Technology or telephone arrangements
- ☐ Final payroll date
- ☐ Tax documents
- ☐ Return of congregational property
- ☐ Other: _____

Person responsible for resolving final employment matters

Name: _____

Role: _____

Contact information: _____

Part Fourteen — Community Relationships

Some congregational partnerships depend heavily upon the pastor's personal relationships.

Community contacts

Person or Organization	Relationship to Congregation	Current Commitment	Next Contact Needed	Person Receiving Relationship
------------------------	------------------------------	--------------------	---------------------	-------------------------------

Person or Organization	Relationship to Congregation	Current Commitment	Next Contact Needed	Person Receiving Relationship
------------------------	------------------------------	--------------------	---------------------	-------------------------------

Consider:

- ☐ Neighboring congregations
- ☐ Ecumenical or interfaith partners
- ☐ Schools
- ☐ Hospitals
- ☐ Care facilities
- ☐ Funeral homes
- ☐ Nonprofit organizations
- ☐ Food or housing ministries
- ☐ Community coalitions
- ☐ Civic leaders
- ☐ Emergency services
- ☐ Counseling or referral partners
- ☐ Other: _____

Introduction plan

Which relationships require a direct introduction rather than only a name and telephone number?

Relationship	Person to Be Introduced	Method	Date
--------------	-------------------------	--------	------

The pastor may introduce the relationship. Those who remain will decide how it continues.

Part Fifteen — Denominational Relationships and Responsibilities**Denominational contacts**

Person or Body	Role	Current Matter or Relationship	Next Action	New Congregational Contact
----------------	------	--------------------------------	-------------	----------------------------

Review:

- ☐ Required notice of departure
- ☐ Formal dissolution of pastoral relationship
- ☐ Congregational meeting requirements
- ☐ Moderation or governance after departure
- ☐ Temporary pastoral leadership
- ☐ Pulpit supply
- ☐ Sacramental authority
- ☐ Staff supervision
- ☐ Required reports
- ☐ Denominational committee assignments
- ☐ Records transfer
- ☐ Boundary expectations
- ☐ Other: _____

Pastor's continuing denominational responsibilities

The pastor may continue serving within the denomination after leaving the congregation.

Responsibility	Continues After Departure?	Relationship to Former Congregation	Boundary or Recusal Needed

Part Sixteen — Institutional Knowledge

Use this section for information that helps people understand how work currently happens.

Do not use it to preserve every custom or prevent future change.

Practices that may not be documented elsewhere

Practice or Responsibility	What People Need to Know	Where Supporting Information Is Kept	Current Contact

Questions to consider

- Which responsibility depends upon one person remembering it?
- What annual event requires preparation months in advance?
- Which community relationship relies upon personal contact?

- Which system has no current written instructions?
- Which commitment is known only through email or conversation?
- What does the governing body assume the pastor does automatically?
- What does staff know that leaders may not know?
- What will create difficulty if no one explains it before departure?

Distinguish information from preference

For each item, ask:

- Is this required?
- Is it a current practice?
- Is it the departing pastor's preference?
- Is it historical background?
- May future leaders change it?

Part Seventeen — Unfinished Work

Not everything should be completed before the pastor leaves.

Unfinished matters

Matter	Current Status	Why It Remains Unfinished	Information Needed by Others	Person or Body Receiving It
--------	----------------	---------------------------	------------------------------	-----------------------------

Reasons work may remain unfinished

- ☐ It belongs to future leadership.
- ☐ The departing pastor should not determine the outcome.
- ☐ There is not enough time to complete it responsibly.
- ☐ Required information is unavailable.
- ☐ Participants are not ready.
- ☐ The matter is part of a longer process.
- ☐ The work should be paused.
- ☐ The work may no longer need to continue.
- ☐ Resolution cannot be forced.
- ☐ Other: _____

Confirm:

- ☐ The unfinished matter has been named.

- ☐ No one has been told it was completed.
 - ☐ Necessary information has been preserved.
 - ☐ The recipient understands that no particular outcome is required.
 - ☐ The matter can remain open without immediate harm.
-

Part Eighteen — Matters the Departing Pastor Is Releasing

The handoff is not complete until the pastor relinquishes responsibility.

Decisions that now belong to others

Ministries others may change or end

Relationships others will carry differently

Questions the pastor will no longer answer

Information the pastor no longer needs to receive

Ways the pastor may be tempted to remain involved

The pastor's plan for responding to future requests for advice or intervention

Part Nineteen — Handoff Meeting Agenda

Suggested participants

- Departing pastor
- Governing-body representative
- Person assuming temporary pastoral responsibility
- Staff supervisor after departure
- Appropriate staff members
- Denominational representative, where appropriate

Not every participant should receive every category of confidential information.

Suggested agenda

1. Confirm authority and dates

- ☐ Final working day
- ☐ Official end date
- ☐ Date responsibilities transfer
- ☐ Person holding authority after departure

2. Review major responsibilities

- ☐ Worship
- ☐ Pastoral care
- ☐ Governance
- ☐ Staff
- ☐ Administration
- ☐ Communication
- ☐ Community and denominational relationships

3. Review urgent items

- ☐ Actions required before departure
- ☐ Deadlines occurring soon after departure
- ☐ Current crises
- ☐ Confirmed commitments

4. Review confidential information separately

- ☐ Authorized recipients only
- ☐ Secure transfer method
- ☐ Retention and access clarified

5. Review unfinished work

- ☐ Matters intentionally left open
- ☐ Information preserved
- ☐ No predetermined outcomes imposed

6. Confirm property and access

- ☐ Keys and devices
- ☐ Records and files
- ☐ Digital systems
- ☐ Account administration

7. Confirm communication

- ☐ Staff know whom they report to
- ☐ Congregation knows where to direct requests
- ☐ Community partners have a current contact

8. Identify missing information

9. Establish final follow-up date

Date: _____

Part Twenty — Final Handoff Checklist**Pastoral care**

- ☐ Active pastoral-care responsibilities have been transferred.
- ☐ Emergency coverage is clear.

- ☐ Confidential information was transferred securely.
- ☐ People receiving continuing care know whom to contact.

Worship

- ☐ Upcoming services have leadership.
- ☐ Worship-planning responsibility is clear.
- ☐ Sacramental authority is clear.
- ☐ Weddings, funerals, and special services have been reviewed.

Governance

- ☐ Governing-body leadership is clear.
- ☐ Upcoming meetings and decisions are documented.
- ☐ Required denominational actions are complete or assigned.

Staff

- ☐ Staff know who supervises them.
- ☐ Personnel authority is clear.
- ☐ Work has not been transferred to staff by assumption.
- ☐ Confidential personnel matters were transferred appropriately.

Ministries and calendar

- ☐ Active ministries have identified leadership.
- ☐ Recurring responsibilities and deadlines are documented.
- ☐ Current commitments are known.
- ☐ Ministries that will pause or end have been identified.

Records and access

- ☐ Official records are current enough for those who remain.
- ☐ Files have been transferred, archived, retained, or destroyed appropriately.
- ☐ Keys and congregational property have been returned.
- ☐ Digital access has been transferred or scheduled for removal.

Relationships

- ☐ Community contacts have a new congregational connection.
- ☐ Denominational contacts know whom to contact.
- ☐ Necessary introductions have occurred.

Unfinished work

- ☐ Unfinished matters are clearly named.
- ☐ Necessary information has been preserved.
- ☐ The pastor has not prescribed future outcomes.

Release

- ☐ The pastor knows when authority ends.
 - ☐ Those who remain know when their responsibility begins.
 - ☐ Staff and leaders know not to continue consulting the former pastor as supervisor or decision maker.
 - ☐ The pastor is prepared to stop receiving routine congregational information.
 - ☐ The handoff is complete enough for the pastor to leave.
-

Handoff Receipt

This acknowledgment confirms that handoff materials were provided and received. It does not indicate agreement with every interpretation or recommendation in the materials.

Departing pastor: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Primary recipient: _____

Role: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Governing-body representative: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Denominational representative, if appropriate: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Location of final handoff materials

Location of confidential materials

Date former pastoral access ends

A handoff cannot preserve the ministry exactly as it was.

Its purpose is to give those who remain the information and responsibility now entrusted to them—and to free the departing pastor to leave.

FM 5.3 — Personal Goodbye Planner for the Departing Pastor

Use with: *Ending Well*, Chapter Five — “The Pastor’s Work of Leaving”

Also supports:

- Chapter Six — “Leaving Staff Relationships Well”
- Chapter Seven — “The Congregation’s Work of Letting Go”
- Chapter Eight — “Boundaries Are Acts of Love”

Purpose

Pastoral ministry is carried through relationships.

Final worship and a farewell celebration make room for a public goodbye, but they cannot hold everything that belongs to particular relationships.

Some relationships warrant a more personal goodbye:

- a homebound member the pastor has visited for years;
- a family accompanied through grief or crisis;
- a trusted congregational leader;
- a staff colleague;
- a young person the pastor baptized and later confirmed;
- a community partner;
- someone with whom the relationship has been difficult;
- a person who cannot attend the final events.

A personal goodbye does not need to be long or dramatic. Often a visit, telephone call, handwritten note, or brief conversation is enough.

This resource helps the departing pastor:

- identify relationships that may need intentional attention;
- establish realistic limits;
- choose an appropriate form for each goodbye;
- express gratitude, affection, regret, apology, encouragement, or blessing;
- avoid promises that undermine post-departure boundaries;
- accept that not every relationship will achieve complete closure.

This resource is not a requirement to meet individually with every member.

The goal is not a perfect farewell.

The goal is to recognize relationships that mattered and acknowledge that their pastoral form is ending.

Part One — Establish the Time Available

Departing pastor: _____

Congregation: _____

Date this planner is being completed: _____

Final Sunday: _____

Final working day: _____

Official end of the pastoral relationship: _____

Time realistically available for personal goodbyes

Number of weeks remaining: _____

Hours per week available: _____

Total approximate time available: _____

Other responsibilities still requiring the pastor's time

☐ Worship preparation

☐ Pastoral care

☐ Handoff

☐ Staff transition

☐ Governing-body meetings

☐ Farewell planning

☐ Moving or office closure

☐ Family responsibilities

☐ Retirement or new-call preparation

☐ Rest and personal support

☐ Other: _____

Limits I need to protect

Part Two — Adopt Realistic Expectations

Review these statements before making a list.

☐ I cannot create an individual farewell experience with every member.

- ☐ A brief goodbye can still be meaningful.
 - ☐ Not every relationship needs the same form of goodbye.
 - ☐ Public farewell events will carry part of the congregation's goodbye.
 - ☐ A letter or telephone call may be more appropriate than a meeting.
 - ☐ Some people will not want a personal goodbye.
 - ☐ Some people may not be available.
 - ☐ Some conversations will remain unfinished.
 - ☐ An apology does not guarantee reconciliation.
 - ☐ I am not responsible for producing closure for everyone.
 - ☐ I do not need to respond to every expression of gratitude individually.
 - ☐ I can honor a relationship without promising that it will continue unchanged.
 - ☐ I can say "I care about you" without saying "I am still your pastor."
-

Part Three — Identify Relationships for Consideration

Begin broadly. Decisions about the form of each goodbye will come later.

Do not use this list to rank people by worth or importance. Use it to notice relationships that may otherwise end only through absence.

Pastoral-care relationships

Consider:

- ☐ Homebound members
- ☐ People in care facilities
- ☐ People living with serious illness
- ☐ Families accompanied through death or grief
- ☐ People accompanied through crisis
- ☐ People with whom the pastor has met regularly
- ☐ People whose pastoral care is currently active
- ☐ People unable to attend farewell events

Names

Congregational leaders

Consider:

- ☐ Current governing-body leaders
- ☐ Former governing-body leaders
- ☐ Committee or ministry leaders
- ☐ Longtime ministry partners
- ☐ People who assumed significant responsibility
- ☐ People who offered the pastor guidance or support
- ☐ People with whom the pastor navigated difficult decisions

Names

Staff colleagues

Consider:

- ☐ Current staff
- ☐ Former staff with whom significant ministry was shared
- ☐ Associate pastors or other clergy
- ☐ Musicians
- ☐ Educators
- ☐ Administrators
- ☐ Facilities staff
- ☐ Preschool or school staff

☐ Longtime contractors or ministry partners

Names

For staff-specific conversations, also use:

- **FM 6.1 — Staff Transition and Handoff Worksheet**

Children, youth, and families

Consider:

- ☐ Children the pastor baptized
- ☐ Young people the pastor confirmed
- ☐ Youth accompanied through significant experiences
- ☐ Families with whom the pastor has shared several generations of ministry
- ☐ Families for whom the departure may be especially significant

Names

Community and denominational relationships

Consider:

- ☐ Neighboring clergy
- ☐ Denominational colleagues
- ☐ Community leaders
- ☐ Funeral-home staff
- ☐ Hospital or care-facility chaplains
- ☐ School leaders
- ☐ Nonprofit partners

- ☐ Ecumenical or interfaith partners
- ☐ Others with whom significant ministry was shared

Names

Relationships involving difficulty or regret

Consider:

- ☐ Someone to whom the pastor owes an apology
- ☐ Someone whose contribution was insufficiently recognized
- ☐ Someone the pastor wishes had been heard more carefully
- ☐ Someone with whom conflict remains unresolved
- ☐ Someone whose relationship with the pastor changed after a difficult decision
- ☐ Someone for whom a respectful acknowledgment may prevent silence from becoming the final word

Names

Keep this list private and secure.

People likely to be overlooked

Consider:

- ☐ Quiet members
- ☐ People who participate online
- ☐ People who have moved away
- ☐ Former members with whom meaningful ministry was shared
- ☐ People without leadership titles
- ☐ Members whose attendance has declined
- ☐ People with limited digital access

☐ People whose experience of the ministry is complicated

Names

Part Four — Decide Which Goodbyes Need Individual Attention

Not everyone identified in Part Three will require an individual meeting.

For each person, ask:

- Would the relationship feel abruptly interrupted without direct acknowledgment?
- Is the person unlikely to attend public farewell events?
- Is active pastoral care currently being transferred?
- Did the relationship involve many years of close ministry?
- Does the pastor need to express particular gratitude?
- Is there something honest and appropriate that should not remain unsaid?
- Would a personal contact serve the other person, or primarily relieve the pastor?
- Could a note, call, or shared gathering carry the goodbye sufficiently?
- Would individual contact create confusion about future boundaries?
- Would the person prefer privacy?

Personal-goodbye list

Person or Household	Why an Intentional Goodbye May Matter	Preferred Form	Who Initiates	Target Date	Completed
					☐
					☐
					☐
					☐
					☐
					☐
					☐
					☐
					☐
					☐

Part Five — Choose the Form of Goodbye

Choose the lightest form that can carry the relationship honestly.

Brief conversation

Appropriate when:

- pastor and member encounter one another naturally;
- the relationship matters but does not require a scheduled meeting;
- a few direct words are enough;
- the person will participate in public farewell events.

Possible words:

I am grateful we shared these years. Thank you for the part you have played in this congregation and in my ministry.

Handwritten note or letter

Appropriate when:

- the pastor wants to name a particular memory;
- scheduling a meeting is impractical;
- the person would value something tangible;
- the pastor wants to express gratitude without requiring a response;
- the person lives at a distance.

Use with:

- **FM 2.2 — Mutual Gratitude Letters and Notes**
-

Telephone or video call

Appropriate when:

- the person cannot attend;
 - distance prevents a visit;
 - the relationship warrants more than a written note;
 - a brief direct conversation would be meaningful.
-

Home, hospital, or care-facility visit

Appropriate when:

- the pastor already has an active pastoral-care relationship;
- the person cannot attend worship or farewell events;
- the visit can occur within the pastor's remaining responsibilities;
- continuing care has been or will be transferred appropriately.

A final visit should not leave the person without a clear understanding of whom to contact afterward.

Coffee, meal, or scheduled conversation

Appropriate when:

- the relationship involved close partnership;
- pastor and member need time to name what they shared;
- both people understand the purpose and limits of the meeting;
- the conversation will not displace more urgent responsibilities.

A meeting does not need to review the entire relationship.

Small-group goodbye

Appropriate for:

- staff teams;
- governing-body members;
- ministry teams;
- longtime volunteers;
- confirmation classes;
- clergy colleagues;
- community partners.

A group farewell can honor several relationships without requiring individual meetings with everyone.

Public farewell

Appropriate when:

- the relationship is primarily congregational rather than individual;
- the person will attend the farewell celebration or final worship;
- the public words genuinely include the person;
- no additional personal contact is necessary.

Public farewell is not a lesser goodbye. It is the congregation's shared goodbye.

No direct contact

Appropriate when:

- the person does not want contact;
- contact would cause harm;
- the relationship is unsafe;
- legal, personnel, safeguarding, or denominational guidance limits contact;
- the pastor's desire for closure would place an unfair burden on the other person;

- the relationship did not warrant individual attention;
- time does not allow it.

Not every relationship needs a final conversation.

Part Six — Plan the Conversation

Use this page for relationships that warrant more than a brief spontaneous goodbye.

Person or household: _____

Relationship: _____

Date and setting: _____

Approximate length: _____

What do I want to acknowledge?

What am I grateful for?

What particular story or memory might I name?

Is there encouragement I want to offer?

Is an apology or acknowledgment appropriate?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Uncertain

If yes, what responsibility is mine to name?

What should I not attempt to resolve?

What boundary might need to be stated clearly?

What blessing can I offer?

Part Seven — A Simple Pattern for Personal Goodbyes

A personal goodbye may move through five simple elements.

1. Acknowledge the ending

Examples:

- “I did not want my final Sunday to arrive without speaking with you.”
- “Before I leave, I wanted us to have an opportunity to say goodbye.”
- “Our pastoral relationship is coming to an end, and I wanted to acknowledge that directly.”
- “I know you may not be able to attend the farewell events, so I wanted to call.”

2. Name the relationship or memory

Examples:

- “I have been remembering the years we served on the session together.”
- “I will remember the conversations we shared during your husband’s illness.”
- “You were one of the people who helped me understand this congregation.”
- “We worked through some difficult decisions together.”
- “I still remember the day you agreed to teach that first class.”

3. Express gratitude

Examples:

- “Thank you for trusting me.”
- “Thank you for telling me the truth when I needed to hear it.”
- “Thank you for the care you offered my family.”
- “Thank you for the ministry you carried so faithfully.”
- “Thank you for forgiving my mistakes.”
- “Thank you for helping me become a different pastor.”

4. Acknowledge what is changing

Examples:

- “After **[date]**, I will no longer be your pastor.”
- “I care about you, and I also need to allow this pastoral relationship to end.”

- “Someone else will now carry responsibility for your pastoral care.”
- “The congregation’s leaders will make the decisions that come next.”
- “Our relationship may find another form in time, but I do not want to make promises about that now.”

5. Offer blessing and goodbye

Examples:

- “I am grateful for the years we shared.”
 - “May God bless you and keep you.”
 - “I will carry this memory with gratitude.”
 - “Thank you, and goodbye.”
 - “Go in peace.”
-

Part Eight — Receiving Gratitude

Personal goodbyes may include praise, gifts, stories, and affection that make the pastor uncomfortable.

The pastor does not need to minimize or explain away what is offered.

Instead of:

- “It was nothing.”
- “Anyone would have done the same.”
- “You do not need to thank me.”
- “I was just doing my job.”
- “The ministry was not really that important.”

Consider:

- “Thank you.”
- “I am grateful that moment mattered to you.”
- “It was a privilege to be your pastor.”
- “Thank you for telling me.”
- “I will carry that story with me.”
- “I received a great deal from you as well.”

Receiving gratitude does not require agreement with every compliment.

It allows the other person to give something back.

Part Nine — Apology and Regret

An approaching departure may create an opportunity for an honest apology.

An apology is appropriate when the pastor can name a specific responsibility without using the conversation to require forgiveness or relieve personal guilt.

An apology may be appropriate when:

- ☐ The pastor recognizes a particular action or failure.
- ☐ The pastor can name the harm without defending it.
- ☐ The other person is not being pressured into a conversation.
- ☐ The apology can be offered without requiring a response.
- ☐ The conversation is safe and appropriate.
- ☐ The apology does not interfere with an active personnel, disciplinary, legal, or safeguarding process.

A simple apology

I have been thinking about **[specific situation]**. I recognize that I **[name the action or failure]**. That caused **[name the effect or harm without exaggeration]**. I am sorry. I do not expect you to resolve this for me or respond in any particular way. I did not want to leave without taking responsibility for my part.

Avoid apologies that:

- explain the other person's behavior;
- contain "if" or "but";
- demand forgiveness;
- ask the other person to comfort the pastor;
- reopen confidential matters;
- require immediate reconciliation;
- use the approaching deadline to force a conversation;
- substitute for formal accountability.

Before offering an apology, ask:

- Is this apology for the other person's sake or primarily for mine?
 - Can I name my responsibility clearly?
 - Am I prepared for the apology not to be accepted?
 - Does another process govern this matter?
 - Would contact cause further harm?
 - Do I need advice before proceeding?
-

Part Ten — Unresolved Conflict

Not every damaged relationship can or should be repaired before the pastor leaves.

A final conversation may be possible when:

- ☐ Both people are willing.
- ☐ The setting is appropriate.
- ☐ There is enough emotional and physical safety.

- ☐ The purpose is clear.
- ☐ Neither person expects complete agreement.
- ☐ No active legal, personnel, disciplinary, or safeguarding process would be compromised.

The purpose may be limited to:

- ☐ Acknowledging that the relationship was difficult
- ☐ Naming one truth each person wants heard
- ☐ Expressing regret
- ☐ Taking responsibility for one's own actions
- ☐ Offering goodwill
- ☐ Agreeing not to reopen the conflict during public farewell events
- ☐ Saying goodbye without reconciliation

Possible language

Our relationship has been difficult, and I do not expect one conversation to resolve everything. I did not want the pastoral relationship to end without acknowledging that difficulty and wishing you peace.

We remember parts of these years differently. I am not asking us to agree about the entire story. I want to thank you for **[specific truth]** and acknowledge my regret about **[specific responsibility]**.

I understand that you may not want a final conversation. I will respect that decision.

When no conversation occurs

The pastor may still:

- write a private reflection that is not sent;
- seek counsel from a spiritual director, therapist, or trusted colleague;
- pray for the person;
- name personal responsibility to an appropriate adviser;
- release the desire to control how the other person remembers the relationship;
- entrust what remains unresolved to God.

Part Eleven — Avoid Promises Made at Goodbye

Goodbye can create pressure to make the separation feel smaller.

Promises to avoid

- “You can always call me.”
- “I will come back whenever you need me.”

- “Of course I will conduct the wedding.”
- “I will be here if anything goes wrong.”
- “I will make sure the next pastor understands.”
- “I will keep an eye on what happens.”
- “Nothing really has to change.”
- “We will stay just as close as we are now.”

What may be said instead

- “I care about you.”
- “Our relationship has mattered to me.”
- “I am grateful for what we have shared.”
- “After [date], someone else will carry responsibility for your pastoral care.”
- “I do not want to make promises now about what our relationship may become later.”
- “I want to honor the boundaries pastor and congregation have established.”
- “If we encounter one another in the community, I will be glad to see you.”
- “For now, the most faithful thing is to let this pastoral relationship end.”

Use with:

- **FM 8.1 — Boundary Conversation Guide and Scenarios**
-

Part Twelve — Transferring Active Pastoral Care

When a personal goodbye occurs within an active pastoral-care relationship, the person should know whom to contact after the pastor leaves.

Care transition

Person or household: _____

Current pastoral-care need:

Person assuming care: _____

Has the person consented to an appropriate transfer of information?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not applicable
- ☐ Requires guidance

How will the introduction or transfer occur?

What minimum information needs to be transferred?

How will confidentiality be protected?

Possible language

After **[date]**, I will no longer be responsible for your pastoral care. **[Name or role]** will be available to you. With your permission, I would like to share the information necessary so that you do not have to begin the entire story again.

Our goodbye does not mean that the congregation is withdrawing its care. It means someone else will now carry the pastoral responsibility I have held.

Part Thirteen — Staff Goodbyes

Staff relationships involve both personal connection and shared professional ministry.

A staff goodbye may need to acknowledge:

- work accomplished together;
- the staff member's expertise;
- invisible responsibilities carried;
- trust or conflict within the working relationship;
- supervisory failures;
- professional growth;
- the end of the pastor's authority;
- freedom to form relationships with future leadership.

Staff-goodbye questions

- What did this staff member contribute?
- What did the pastor learn from this colleague?
- What work became possible because of the staff member?
- What gratitude has remained unspoken?
- Is there a failure the pastor should acknowledge?
- What supervisory authority is ending?
- What professional or personal relationship may continue?
- What boundary will prevent the relationship from becoming a source of inside information?

Possible language

Thank you for the work we shared. Your **[gift or expertise]** strengthened the ministry and made my work better.

I also want to acknowledge that I did not always **[listen, communicate clearly, provide support, or name another specific responsibility]** as I should have. I am sorry.

After **[date]**, I will no longer be your supervisor or head of staff. You are free to serve the leadership and ministry that continue. You do not need to preserve my ministry in order to honor what we shared.

Use with:

- **FM 6.1 — Staff Transition and Handoff Worksheet**
-

Part Fourteen — The Pastor’s Family

The pastor’s household may also need opportunities for goodbye.

Family members should not be treated as extensions of the pastor’s office.

Ask each family or household member:

- Which relationships matter to you?
- Whom would you like to see before leaving?
- Would you prefer a private goodbye, public acknowledgment, or no special attention?
- Are there friends, teachers, staff members, or families you want to contact?
- What farewell events do you want to attend?
- What public attention would feel uncomfortable?
- What support do you need during the final weeks?

Family-goodbye plan

Family or Household Member	Person or Group	Preferred Form	Date	Support Needed
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The pastor should not commit family members to public participation without their consent.

Part Fifteen — Scheduling the Goodbyes

Do not fill every available hour.

Leave room for ordinary ministry, unexpected events, family needs, preparation, and rest.

Weekly planning table

Week or Date	Person or Group	Form of Goodbye	Location or Method	Time Needed	Completed
					☐
					☐
					☐
					☐
					☐
					☐
					☐
					☐

Time-protection review

- ☐ I have not scheduled more conversations than I can enter attentively.
 - ☐ I have left unscheduled time for pastoral emergencies.
 - ☐ I have protected worship preparation.
 - ☐ I have protected handoff responsibilities.
 - ☐ I have protected time for staff.
 - ☐ I have protected time for my household.
 - ☐ I have protected time for rest and emotional support.
 - ☐ I have allowed public farewell events to carry part of the goodbye.
-

Part Sixteen — When Someone Requests a Meeting

Not every request requires a meeting.

Before agreeing, ask:

- What does the person hope the meeting will accomplish?
- Does the matter require pastoral attention before departure?
- Would a telephone call or note be sufficient?
- Is the request primarily about future contact?
- Does the person want to reopen a conflict?
- Am I the appropriate person to address it?
- Is there enough time to meet without abandoning other responsibilities?
- Would another leader need to participate?
- Is the conversation safe and appropriate?

Sample response when a meeting is possible

Thank you for asking. I would be glad to meet briefly so that we can acknowledge the ending and say goodbye. I have **[amount of time]** available on **[date]**.

Sample response when another form is more realistic

Thank you for reaching out. My remaining schedule does not allow me to meet individually with everyone, but I would be glad to speak by telephone or receive a note from you.

Sample response when the request belongs elsewhere

I understand that this matter is important. Because it concerns **[future congregational decisions/personnel/governance/another area]**, it now belongs with **[person or body]** rather than with me.

Sample response when a final conflict conversation is not appropriate

I recognize that our relationship has included unresolved difficulty. I do not believe a final meeting at this point would bring the kind of resolution you are seeking. I will respect what remains unresolved and wish you peace.

Part Seventeen — Record of Completed Goodbyes

Do not record confidential details. Record only enough to remember that contact occurred and whether follow-up is required before departure.

Person or Group	Date	Form	Follow-Up Required Before Departure	Completed
				☐
				☐
				☐
				☐
				☐
				☐
				☐
				☐

Store this record securely and destroy it when it is no longer needed.

Part Eighteen — Final Personal Review

Complete this review during the final week.

Gratitude

- ☐ I have thanked people whose contributions were especially important.
- ☐ I have received gratitude without minimizing it.
- ☐ I have recognized staff and lay leadership.
- ☐ I have expressed gratitude to the congregation as a whole.

Relationships

- ☐ I made reasonable provision for homebound members and others unable to attend.
- ☐ I did not equate individual contact with the value of a relationship.
- ☐ I respected people who did not want contact.

☐ I did not require my household to experience goodbye in the same way I did.

Honesty

☐ I offered appropriate apologies where possible.

☐ I did not force reconciliation.

☐ I accepted that some relationships remain unresolved.

☐ I sought support for emotions that do not belong to the congregation to manage.

Boundaries

☐ I did not promise continuing pastoral care.

☐ I did not make commitments about weddings or funerals.

☐ I did not recruit members or staff to keep me informed.

☐ I did not use goodbye conversations to influence future decisions.

☐ I clearly acknowledged that my pastoral role is ending.

Capacity

☐ I did not attempt to meet individually with everyone.

☐ I protected time for handoff and ordinary ministry.

☐ I protected time for family, support, and rest.

☐ I allowed the farewell celebration and final worship to carry the congregation's shared goodbye.

What I Want to Carry with Me

People for whom I am especially grateful

Stories I want to remember

Things this congregation taught me

Ways I changed during these years

Regrets I need to acknowledge

Things I cannot repair or complete

What I need to release

What I entrust to God

A personal goodbye honors a relationship without trying to preserve it unchanged.

The pastor may say:

Thank you.

I am sorry.

You mattered to me.

I will remember.

Our pastoral relationship is ending.

And now, goodbye.

FM 6.1 — Staff Transition and Handoff Worksheet

Use with: *Ending Well*, Chapter Six — “Leaving Staff Relationships Well”

Also supports:

- Chapter Five — “The Pastor’s Work of Leaving”
- Chapter Eight — “Boundaries Are Acts of Love”

Purpose

For staff, a pastoral departure is both relational and professional.

Staff may be losing:

- a colleague;
- a supervisor;
- a head of staff;
- a ministry partner;
- a mentor;
- a friend;
- a familiar way of working.

At the same time, they may be wondering:

- Who supervises me now?
- Who can make decisions?
- Will my responsibilities change?
- What work will be added?
- What happens to projects already underway?
- Is my position secure?
- What will temporary leadership expect?
- What authority will future pastoral leadership have?
- Am I expected to keep everything functioning?
- What happens to my relationship with the departing pastor?

These are not selfish or resistant questions. The transition may affect staff members’ livelihoods, vocations, workloads, professional relationships, and well-being.

This worksheet helps the departing pastor, governing body, personnel leaders, and staff:

- clarify supervision and authority;
- identify responsibilities that need to be completed, transferred, paused, or ended;
- listen to staff knowledge;
- prevent staff from silently inheriting the pastor’s work;
- document immediate workload changes;
- protect confidential personnel information;
- end the pastor’s supervisory authority clearly;
- establish expectations for continuing friendship and collegiality;
- prevent staff relationships from becoming a back channel into congregational life;
- give staff freedom to form relationships with temporary and future leadership.

This resource does not replace employment agreements, personnel policies, denominational requirements, legal advice, or formal human-resources processes.

Part One — Transition Information

Congregation: _____

Departing pastor: _____

Pastor's title: _____

Date staff were informed: _____

Date congregation will be or was informed: _____

Pastor's final working day: _____

Official end of pastoral relationship: _____

Date new supervision begins: _____

Person coordinating the staff transition

Name: _____

Role: _____

Contact information: _____

Personnel or governing-body representative

Name: _____

Role: _____

Denominational representative, if involved

Name: _____

Role: _____

Temporary pastoral leader, if known

Name: _____

Role: _____

Start date: _____

Part Two — Staff Roster

Staff Member	Position	Employment Status	Current Supervisor	Supervisor After Departure	Staff Member Informed
		Full-time / Part-time / Contract			☐
		Full-time / Part-time / Contract			☐
		Full-time / Part-time / Contract			☐
		Full-time / Part-time / Contract			☐
		Full-time / Part-time / Contract			☐
		Full-time / Part-time / Contract			☐

Other people whose work may be affected

- ☐ Preschool or school staff
- ☐ Musicians or worship contractors
- ☐ Nursery staff
- ☐ Custodial or facilities contractors
- ☐ Bookkeeping or accounting services
- ☐ Communications contractors
- ☐ Technology or livestream support
- ☐ Security personnel
- ☐ Ministry interns
- ☐ Volunteers carrying staff-like responsibilities
- ☐ Other: _____

Part Three — What Staff Need to Know

Staff deserve direct communication about what is known and honesty about what is not.

Information available now

- ☐ Pastor's final working day
- ☐ Official end date
- ☐ Who supervises each staff member
- ☐ Who approves schedules and leave
- ☐ Who assigns work
- ☐ Who makes program decisions
- ☐ Who makes worship decisions
- ☐ Who handles personnel concerns
- ☐ Who approves expenditures
- ☐ Who communicates with the governing body
- ☐ Who responds to emergencies
- ☐ Which responsibilities remain unchanged
- ☐ Which responsibilities are changing
- ☐ Where questions should be directed

Information not yet available

- ☐ Temporary pastoral leadership
- ☐ Longer-term supervision
- ☐ Future staffing structure
- ☐ Changes in job descriptions
- ☐ Future pastoral expectations
- ☐ Program continuation
- ☐ Budget implications
- ☐ Search or transition timeline
- ☐ Other: _____

Staff communication summary**What is known:**

What is not yet known:

Who will provide updates:

How often will updates be provided:

Where should staff direct questions:

Part Four — Clarify Supervisory Authority

The pastor's supervisory authority should end at a clearly identified time.

Before departure

Who serves as head of staff or primary supervisor?

Who may assign work?

Who approves leave?

Who conducts personnel conversations?

Who resolves staff conflict?

Who approves expenses?

After departure

Who serves as primary supervisor?

Who may assign work?

Who approves leave?

Who conducts personnel conversations?

Who resolves staff conflict?

Who approves expenses?

Who communicates with the governing body?

Effective transfer

Departing pastor's supervisory authority ends on:

New supervisory authority begins on:

Formal action required:

Who communicates this change to staff:

Date communicated: _____

Confirm:

- ☐ Every staff member knows who supervises them.
 - ☐ Every supervisor understands the authority and limits of the role.
 - ☐ Staff know who approves leave and schedules.
 - ☐ Staff know who assigns or changes work.
 - ☐ Staff know where to take personnel concerns.
 - ☐ Governing-body members know who may communicate direction to staff.
 - ☐ Multiple leaders will not issue conflicting instructions.
 - ☐ The departing pastor will not continue supervising informally after departure.
-

Part Five — Map Current Staff Responsibilities

Complete a separate copy of this section for each staff member.

Staff member

Name: _____

Position: _____

Current job description last reviewed: _____

Regular responsibilities

Responsibility	Frequency	Who Currently Authorizes It	Who Else Depends on It	Continues After Departure?
				Yes / No / Review
				Yes / No / Review
				Yes / No / Review
				Yes / No / Review
				Yes / No / Review
				Yes / No / Review

Informal or unrecorded responsibilities

Responsibility	How It Developed	Time Required	Who Knows It Is Being Done	Continue, Transfer, Pause, or End
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Work currently shared with the departing pastor

Shared Responsibility	Pastor's Part	Staff Member's Part	What Changes After Departure
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Part Six — Identify Work That May Be Displaced

A pastoral departure often produces work that no longer has an obvious owner.

Do not assume that staff will absorb it.

Responsibilities currently carried by the pastor

Responsibility	Must Continue?	Proper Owner After Departure	Staff Role, If Any	Decision Required By
	Yes / No / Review			
	Yes / No / Review			
	Yes / No / Review			
	Yes / No / Review			
	Yes / No / Review			
	Yes / No / Review			

Possible displaced work

Review:

- ☐ Worship planning
- ☐ Preacher coordination
- ☐ Pastoral-care communication
- ☐ Funeral coordination
- ☐ Wedding inquiries
- ☐ Governing-body support
- ☐ Agenda preparation
- ☐ Committee coordination
- ☐ Staff meetings
- ☐ Conflict management
- ☐ Building decisions
- ☐ Financial approval

- ☐ Community relationships
- ☐ Denominational communication
- ☐ Emergency response
- ☐ Website and public communication
- ☐ Volunteer coordination
- ☐ Other: _____

Before assigning displaced work to staff, ask:

- ☐ Does this responsibility belong within the staff member's role?
 - ☐ Does the staff member have authority to perform it?
 - ☐ Does the staff member have the necessary knowledge?
 - ☐ Does the staff member have time?
 - ☐ What existing work will be reduced or stopped?
 - ☐ Is additional compensation appropriate?
 - ☐ Is training required?
 - ☐ Is the assignment temporary?
 - ☐ When will it be reviewed?
 - ☐ Who supervises the work?
 - ☐ Has the staff member been consulted?
 - ☐ Would the responsibility more properly belong to the governing body?
 - ☐ Would it more properly belong to temporary pastoral leadership?
 - ☐ Could the work pause or end?
-

Part Seven — Workload Change Review

Complete this section for each staff member whose work will change.

Staff member: _____

Current weekly hours: _____

Current workload assessment:

- ☐ Manageable
- ☐ Frequently full
- ☐ Already excessive
- ☐ Unclear

Responsibilities being added

New Responsibility	Estimated Time	Start Date	End or Review Date	Authority Granted
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Responsibilities being reduced, paused, or ended

Responsibility	Change	Effective Date	Who Must Be Informed
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Support required

- ☐ Additional paid hours
- ☐ Temporary staff support
- ☐ Volunteer support
- ☐ Training
- ☐ Technology
- ☐ Clearer authority
- ☐ More frequent supervision
- ☐ Reduced programming
- ☐ Delayed deadlines
- ☐ Other: _____

Compensation or employment review needed?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Uncertain

Who will review it: _____**Review date:** _____

Part Eight — Listen to Staff Knowledge

Staff members often know how congregational work actually happens.

The handoff should not flow only from pastor to staff. It should also create a way for staff knowledge to be heard by the governing body and temporary leadership.

Staff knowledge inventory

Worship and congregational life

- What preparation happens behind each worship service?
- Which responsibilities depend upon informal arrangements?
- What annual services require early planning?
- Which volunteers need direct contact or reminders?
- What becomes difficult when the usual pattern changes?

What leaders need to know:

Administration and systems

- Which systems have no written instructions?
- Who has administrative access?
- Which deadlines are easy to miss?
- Which process depends upon one person's memory?
- What fails when a particular person is absent?

What leaders need to know:

Programs and ministries

- Which ministries require long preparation?
- Which programs currently depend upon staff work beyond the job description?
- Which programs lack adequate leadership?
- What commitments have already been made?
- Which programs could pause without significant harm?

What leaders need to know:

Congregational relationships

- Which groups or leaders need regular communication?
- Where are expectations unclear?

- Which relationships have been managed informally?
- What concerns are staff carrying that leaders may not see?
- Where could transition anxiety create conflict?

Do not record confidential personal opinions or unverified allegations in a general worksheet.

What leaders need to know:

Community relationships

- Which organizations contact staff rather than the pastor?
- Which partnerships depend upon personal relationships?
- What commitments or events are approaching?
- Who needs a new congregational contact?

What leaders need to know:

Part Nine — Staff Handoff Meeting

Suggested participants

- Departing pastor
- Staff members
- Person assuming staff supervision
- Governing-body or personnel representative
- Temporary pastoral leader, if known
- Denominational representative, when appropriate

Not every participant should receive confidential personnel information.

Suggested agenda

1. Acknowledge the transition

- ☐ Name the pastor's final working day.
- ☐ Acknowledge the relational and vocational effects on staff.
- ☐ Allow questions without requiring immediate emotional disclosure.

2. Clarify authority

- ☐ Name each staff member's supervisor.

- ☐ Clarify decision-making authority.
- ☐ Clarify leave and schedule approval.
- ☐ Clarify financial authorization.
- ☐ Clarify emergency procedures.

3. Review responsibilities

- ☐ Identify work that continues.
- ☐ Identify work being transferred.
- ☐ Identify work being added.
- ☐ Identify work being reduced.
- ☐ Identify work being paused or ended.

4. Hear staff knowledge

- ☐ Invite staff to describe how work actually happens.
- ☐ Identify invisible or informal responsibilities.
- ☐ Identify approaching deadlines.
- ☐ Identify systems or relationships needing handoff.

5. Review workload

- ☐ Estimate time required by new responsibilities.
- ☐ Reduce other work where needed.
- ☐ Identify compensation or personnel questions.
- ☐ Establish review dates.

6. Discuss communication

- ☐ What may staff say to members?
- ☐ Where should questions be directed?
- ☐ Who communicates future changes?
- ☐ How will staff receive updates?

7. Discuss the relational ending

- ☐ Make room for gratitude.

- ☐ Acknowledge difficulty where appropriate.
- ☐ Clarify the end of supervisory authority.
- ☐ Discuss continuing professional or personal relationships.
- ☐ Establish boundaries around congregational information.

8. Confirm next steps

- ☐ Assign responsibilities.
- ☐ Record decisions.
- ☐ Set the next review meeting.

Next review date: _____

Part Ten — Individual Staff Transition Conversation

Complete a separate copy for each staff member.

Staff member: _____

Position: _____

Date: _____

Participants: _____

What the staff member needs to know

Questions the staff member has

Questions that can be answered now

Questions that remain unresolved

Responsibilities changing

Responsibilities remaining the same

Workload adjustments

New supervisor

Effective date

Review date

Support needed

Personnel matters requiring separate confidential follow-up

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

If yes, record only where and when the confidential follow-up will occur.

Part Eleven — Personnel and Employment Questions

A pastoral transition may raise questions that cannot be answered by the departing pastor.

Questions staff may have

- ☐ Is my position continuing?
- ☐ Can temporary leadership change my responsibilities?
- ☐ Can future pastoral leadership change my position?

- ☐ Will my hours change?
- ☐ Will my compensation change?
- ☐ Who evaluates my work?
- ☐ Who approves leave?
- ☐ Who handles grievances?
- ☐ What happens to current personnel processes?
- ☐ Will job descriptions be reviewed?
- ☐ Who has access to personnel files?
- ☐ Other: _____

Who has authority to answer?

Question or Issue	Person or Body with Authority	Guidance Needed	Date for Response
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Confirm:

- ☐ The departing pastor has not made promises outside their authority.
 - ☐ Staff have not been given false reassurance.
 - ☐ Uncertainty has been acknowledged honestly.
 - ☐ Personnel policies have been reviewed.
 - ☐ Denominational or legal guidance has been sought when needed.
 - ☐ Confidential personnel information is protected.
-

Part Twelve — Protect Confidential Information

Staff transition conversations may involve personnel matters, pastoral-care information, or sensitive congregational concerns.

Do not place in a general transition file:

- ☐ Performance evaluations
- ☐ Medical information
- ☐ Compensation details not authorized for sharing

- ☐ Grievances
- ☐ Disciplinary records
- ☐ Unverified allegations
- ☐ Private opinions about staff members
- ☐ Confidential pastoral-care information
- ☐ Safeguarding reports
- ☐ Legal advice

Confidential matters will be handled by:

Name or body: _____

Storage location: _____

Authorized access: _____

Applicable policy: _____

Confirm:

- ☐ Staff know what information they are authorized to receive.
 - ☐ Staff know what information they may share.
 - ☐ Pastoral-care information is transferred only as necessary and authorized.
 - ☐ Personnel matters are handled outside general staff meetings.
 - ☐ Staff are not asked to keep inappropriate institutional secrets.
-

Part Thirteen — Gratitude for Shared Professional Ministry

Staff farewells deserve more than a final administrative meeting.

The departing pastor may wish to name:

- expertise the staff member brought;
- work that often remained invisible;
- moments when the staff member offered wise counsel;
- ways the staff member made the pastor's work better;
- challenges navigated together;
- growth in the staff member's vocation;
- things the pastor learned from the staff member.

Staff may wish to name:

- what they learned from the pastor;
- what helped them do their work;
- what they valued in the working relationship;
- what was difficult;
- what they hope to carry into future ministry;
- what needs to be released.

Gratitude prompts**What work did we share?**

What did this staff member contribute?

What did the pastor contribute?

What became possible because of the partnership?

What gratitude has not yet been spoken?

Use with:

- **FM 2.2 — Mutual Gratitude Letters and Notes**
- **FM 5.3 — Personal Goodbye Planner for the Departing Pastor**

Part Fourteen — Acknowledging Supervisory Failures

The end of supervision may provide an appropriate opportunity for the pastor to acknowledge a failure.

Possible areas for acknowledgment

☐ Expectations were unclear.

☐ Feedback was infrequent.

- ☐ The staff member was not adequately supported.
- ☐ Workload concerns were not addressed.
- ☐ The pastor failed to listen.
- ☐ Conflict was avoided.
- ☐ Conflict was handled poorly.
- ☐ The staff member's contribution was insufficiently recognized.
- ☐ Authority was exercised inconsistently.
- ☐ The pastor relied too heavily on the staff member.
- ☐ Other: _____

A simple acknowledgment

I want to acknowledge that I did not **[name the specific action or failure]** as well as I should have. That affected you by **[name the effect without speaking for the staff member]**. I am sorry. I do not expect you to resolve this for me. I wanted to take responsibility for my part before our supervisory relationship ends.

Do not:

- require forgiveness;
 - conduct a final performance evaluation;
 - ask the staff member to comfort the pastor;
 - reopen a confidential personnel process;
 - promise a remedy outside the pastor's remaining authority;
 - use an apology to influence how the staff member speaks about the pastor later.
-

Part Fifteen — Do Not Assign Staff to Protect the Pastor's Legacy

A departing pastor should not ask staff to keep the pastor's preferred ministries, practices, or decisions unchanged.

Legacy pressure may sound like:

- "Make sure they do not dismantle this."
- "Do not let the next pastor change that."
- "You know why we have always done it this way."
- "Keep this ministry going after I leave."
- "Tell the new pastor what really happened."
- "Make sure people remember who started this."
- "Call me if they make the wrong decision."

Staff should be free to:

- ☐ Offer their professional judgment through appropriate structures

- ☐ Support a ministry they believe remains valuable
- ☐ Recommend change
- ☐ Form a different judgment from the departing pastor
- ☐ Work within temporary leadership arrangements
- ☐ Build trust with future pastoral leadership
- ☐ Participate honestly in later discernment
- ☐ Allow a ministry or practice to end

The departing pastor may say:

I remain grateful for the work we did together. You are not responsible for preserving it exactly as I leave it. You are free to bring your gifts and judgment to the ministry that continues.

Part Sixteen — Continuing Professional Relationships

The end of the pastoral relationship does not necessarily end every professional relationship.

Former colleagues may continue to:

- serve within the same denomination;
- participate in the same professional network;
- consult one another about areas of expertise;
- attend continuing-education events;
- serve on committees;
- share resources;
- remain friends.

Relationship review

Staff Relationship	May Continue as Friendship?	May Continue Professionally?	Denominational Contact Likely?	Boundary Needed
	Yes / No / Uncertain	Yes / No / Uncertain	Yes / No	
	Yes / No / Uncertain	Yes / No / Uncertain	Yes / No	
	Yes / No / Uncertain	Yes / No / Uncertain	Yes / No	

Questions to discuss

- What part of the relationship is ending?
- What part may appropriately continue?
- Is there an unequal supervisory pattern that needs time to change?
- Can professional advice be offered without resuming supervision?
- Will denominational responsibilities require continued contact?
- What topics should remain outside continuing friendship?

- How will each person respond when conversation turns toward the former congregation?
 - Would a period of distance be helpful?
-

Part Seventeen — Ending Supervisory Authority

After the effective date, the former pastor no longer:

- ☐ Assigns work
- ☐ Approves leave
- ☐ Evaluates staff
- ☐ Resolves staff conflict
- ☐ Intervenes with the governing body on a staff member's behalf
- ☐ Interprets the staff member's job description
- ☐ Directs staff priorities
- ☐ Approves expenditures
- ☐ Receives personnel complaints
- ☐ Serves as the staff member's institutional advocate
- ☐ Decides what should happen inside the congregation

If a former staff member asks, "What would you do?"

The former pastor may respond:

I care about you and respect your judgment, but I am no longer your supervisor and do not know the full situation. This decision belongs with **[current supervisor or appropriate body]**.

Or:

I can speak as a professional colleague about the general question, but I should not advise you about what this congregation should do.

Or:

I am not the right person to receive information about that conflict. Please take it to **[appropriate person or body]**.

Part Eighteen — Do Not Make Staff a Window into the Congregation

Continuing friendship can become a source of inside information.

Questions the former pastor should avoid

- What did the governing body decide?
- What does everyone think about temporary leadership?
- Has the search begun?
- Who is unhappy?
- What happened with that conflict?
- What is attendance like?
- What are people saying about me?
- What does the new pastor think?
- How is the new pastor doing?
- Are they changing the ministry we started?

Information staff should not be expected to provide

- ☐ Governing-body deliberations
- ☐ Personnel information
- ☐ Congregational conflict
- ☐ Pastoral-care information
- ☐ Opinions about temporary or future leadership
- ☐ Reactions to the former pastor
- ☐ Search or discernment information
- ☐ Confidential or internal communication

Shared boundary statement

We may remain friends or professional colleagues. We will not use that relationship to keep the former pastor informed about, involved in, or influential over the congregation.

If conversation becomes a back channel

A staff member may say:

I value our relationship, but I cannot be your source of information about the congregation.

That matter belongs with the congregation's current leadership.

I do not want our friendship to place me between loyalties.

The former pastor may say:

You do not need to report congregational news to me. I want you to be free to serve the ministry that continues.

Part Nineteen — Freedom to Form New Relationships

Staff members need freedom to learn and work with temporary and future leadership.

Staff are free to:

- ☐ Develop trust with new supervisors
- ☐ Adjust to a different leadership style
- ☐ Support decisions the former pastor might not have made
- ☐ Offer honest feedback to new leadership
- ☐ Change established work patterns
- ☐ Participate in restructuring
- ☐ Recognize gifts in future pastoral leadership
- ☐ Experience difficulty without turning automatically to the former pastor
- ☐ Value the former relationship without using it as the standard for every future relationship

The departing pastor may say:

We did good work together. You do not need to demonstrate loyalty to me by resisting someone else's leadership.

You are free to build a different working relationship with the person who comes next.

You may change practices we established together.

The significance of our work does not depend upon everything remaining as we left it.

For general post-departure boundary teaching and scenarios beyond staff relationships, see FM 8.1 — Boundary Conversation Guide and Scenarios.

Part Twenty — Staff Transition Review Schedule

Temporary arrangements should not become permanent through neglect.

Initial review

Date: _____

Participants: _____

Questions:

- Is supervision clear?
- Is decision-making authority clear?
- Is workload manageable?
- Are staff receiving conflicting direction?

- What responsibilities remain unassigned?
- What should pause or end?
- What information is still missing?

Second review

Date: _____

Participants: _____

Questions:

- What is working?
- What is not working?
- What has changed since the first review?
- Are temporary responsibilities still appropriate?
- Is additional support or compensation needed?
- What needs governing-body action?

Review when temporary pastoral leadership begins

Date: _____

Participants: _____

Questions:

- What authority does temporary leadership hold?
 - How will staff meetings function?
 - What expectations are changing?
 - How will conflict or uncertainty be addressed?
 - When will arrangements be reviewed again?
-

Part Twenty-One — Final Staff Transition Checklist

Communication

- ☐ Staff heard about the departure directly.
- ☐ Staff know what is known and what remains undecided.
- ☐ Staff know where questions should go.
- ☐ Staff will receive continuing updates.

Supervision and authority

- ☐ Every staff member has a named supervisor.
- ☐ The effective date of new supervision is clear.

- ☐ Decision-making authority is clear.
- ☐ Leave, schedules, expenses, and personnel concerns have an approver.
- ☐ The departing pastor's authority ends on a specific date.

Responsibilities and workload

- ☐ Current staff responsibilities have been reviewed.
- ☐ Informal work has been identified.
- ☐ Displaced pastoral work has an appropriate owner.
- ☐ Staff have not inherited responsibilities through assumption.
- ☐ Added work is matched by reduced work, additional hours, or support.
- ☐ Temporary assignments have review dates.

Knowledge and handoff

- ☐ Staff knowledge has been heard.
- ☐ Important systems and deadlines are documented.
- ☐ Community relationships have a continuing contact.
- ☐ Staff know where handoff materials are stored.

Personnel care

- ☐ Job-security questions have been addressed as honestly as possible.
- ☐ Personnel matters are handled confidentially.
- ☐ The pastor has not made promises outside their authority.
- ☐ Staff know who handles grievances or concerns.

Relational ending

- ☐ Pastor and staff had an opportunity to express gratitude.
- ☐ Supervisory failures were acknowledged where appropriate.
- ☐ Staff were released from preserving the pastor's legacy.
- ☐ Continuing friendships or professional relationships were discussed.
- ☐ Staff contact will not become a back channel into congregational life.
- ☐ Staff are free to form relationships with temporary and future leadership.

Staff Transition Summary**Supervision after departure**

Responsibilities changing

Work being added

Work being reduced, paused, or ended

Staff knowledge requiring further attention

Personnel questions still awaiting an answer

Review dates

Boundaries for continuing relationships

Acknowledgment

This acknowledgment confirms that transition information was discussed. It does not change an employment agreement, job description, personnel policy, or denominational requirement.

Departing pastor: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

New supervisor or governing-body representative: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Staff member: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Personnel representative, if appropriate: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Leaving staff relationships well does not preserve every working relationship as it was.

It provides clarity, honors the ministry colleagues shared, ends supervisory authority, protects staff from inappropriate burdens, and frees them to serve under the leadership that comes next.

FM 7.1 — Immediate Post-Departure Start-Up Checklist

Purpose of This Resource

A pastor's final day changes the congregation's life immediately. Others must now carry the pastor's responsibilities. Staff need a supervisor, members need a pastoral-care contact, and worship, administration, communication, and emergency response must continue.

This checklist guides congregational leaders through the first days and weeks after the pastoral relationship formally ends.

It does not begin the deeper work of remembering, listening, discernment, search, or call. Those tasks belong to later stages of transition.

The immediate task is simpler:

- establish clear temporary authority;
- maintain essential ministries;
- care for the congregation and staff;
- honor appropriate boundaries;
- address urgent practical matters; and
- create enough stability for the congregation to enter the next stage faithfully.

Not every congregation will need every item. Adapt this checklist to your polity, size, staffing structure, and denominational requirements.

Transition Information

Congregation: _____

Departing pastor: _____

Pastor's final day of service: _____

Date the pastoral relationship formally ends: _____

Person or body coordinating the immediate transition:

Denominational or judicatory contact:

Interim, transitional, stated-supply, or temporary pastoral leader, if appointed:

Date temporary leadership begins: _____

Date this checklist was reviewed: _____

Part One: Confirm That the Pastoral Relationship Has Ended

A clear ending protects the departing pastor, the congregation, staff members, and future pastoral leadership. Before moving into the next stage, leaders should confirm that the responsibilities and authority of the departing pastor have actually concluded.

Final-Day Confirmation

- ☐ The pastor's final date of service has been communicated clearly.
- ☐ The congregation understands when the pastoral relationship formally ends.
- ☐ Staff members understand that the departing pastor no longer supervises their work after that date.
- ☐ Congregational officers and ministry leaders understand that the departing pastor no longer has authority to make decisions on behalf of the congregation.
- ☐ The departing pastor has completed or transferred essential responsibilities.
- ☐ Keys, access cards, financial instruments, equipment, and congregational property have been returned or accounted for.
- ☐ Administrative and digital access has been transferred or discontinued as appropriate.
- ☐ The congregation has identified who now receives messages formerly directed to the pastor.
- ☐ The departing pastor's name and contact information have been removed from places where they could imply continuing pastoral responsibility.

These may include:

- the church website;
- voicemail greetings;
- email signatures;
- staff directories;
- worship bulletins;
- newsletters;
- social-media profiles;
- emergency contact lists;
- community directories; and
- signs or printed materials.

- ☐ The departing pastor has been removed as an authorized signer or representative where required.
- ☐ The departing pastor and congregational leaders share the same understanding of any continuing relationship permitted by denominational policy.

Matters Requiring Follow-Up

Matter	Person Responsible	Due Date	Completed
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Matter	Person Responsible	Due Date	Completed
			☐
			☐
			☐

Part Two: Establish Temporary Authority

During the immediate post-departure period, uncertainty about authority can produce unnecessary conflict. Staff members and ministry leaders should not have to guess who may make decisions.

Temporary authority does not need to imitate the former pastoral structure. It does need to be understandable, appropriately authorized, and limited to the work that must be done now.

Governing Authority

The governing body responsible during this period is:

Its moderator, chair, or presiding officer is:

The person authorized to convene meetings is:

The denominational representative who should be consulted is:

Temporary Decision-Making Map

Identify who has authority in each area.

Area of Responsibility	Person or Body with Authority	Limits or Conditions
Worship planning		
Pastoral care		
Staff supervision		
Personnel decisions		
Financial approvals		
Building use		
Public communication		
Emergency response		

Area of Responsibility	Person or Body with Authority	Limits or Conditions
Ministry scheduling		
Denominational communication		
Community relationships		
Other:		

Authority Review

- ☐ Temporary authority has been formally approved where required.
- ☐ Authority is consistent with congregational bylaws, policies, and denominational polity.
- ☐ Staff and ministry leaders have received the decision-making map.
- ☐ The congregation knows who is providing pastoral leadership.
- ☐ The limits of temporary authority have been identified.
- ☐ A process exists for decisions that fall outside those limits.
- ☐ Temporary leaders know whom to contact when they are uncertain.
- ☐ A date has been established for reviewing the temporary arrangement.

Review date: _____

Part Three: Arrange Pastoral Care Coverage

Pastoral needs continue after a pastor leaves. Illness, hospitalization, death, family crisis, and other urgent situations may arise immediately. Members should know how to request care, and those providing care should understand their responsibilities.

Pastoral Care Contact

Primary pastoral-care contact:

Telephone: _____

Email: _____

Backup pastoral-care contact:

Telephone: _____

Email: _____

After-hours or emergency procedure:

Pastoral Care Coverage Checklist

- ☐ A qualified person has been assigned to receive pastoral-care requests.
- ☐ Backup coverage has been arranged.
- ☐ The church office knows how to direct pastoral-care calls.
- ☐ Staff members and key leaders know the emergency procedure.
- ☐ The congregation has been told how to request pastoral care.
- ☐ Local hospitals, care facilities, funeral homes, or other appropriate partners have updated contact information when necessary.
- ☐ Previously identified urgent pastoral-care situations have been transferred appropriately.
- ☐ Only the minimum necessary confidential information has been shared.
- ☐ Sensitive records are secure and accessible only to authorized persons.
- ☐ Procedures are in place for funerals, memorial services, weddings, baptisms, and other time-sensitive pastoral responsibilities.
- ☐ The departing pastor is not being treated as the default backup for pastoral emergencies.

Current Urgent Care Responsibilities

Do not include unnecessary confidential details on this general worksheet.

Need or Situation	Assigned To	Next Action	Review Date
-------------------	-------------	-------------	-------------

Part Four: Maintain Worship and Sacramental Life

Worship is one of the congregation's most visible signs of continuity. The congregation does not need to pretend that nothing has changed, but worship should be planned with sufficient clarity that people are not left wondering who is responsible.

Worship Leadership

Person coordinating worship during the immediate transition:

Preachers or worship leaders currently scheduled:

Person responsible for arranging additional leadership:

Person responsible for music coordination:

Worship Checklist

- ☐ Worship leaders are scheduled for the coming weeks.
- ☐ Preaching responsibilities are confirmed.
- ☐ Presiding responsibilities for sacraments or ordinances are assigned according to denominational requirements.
- ☐ Music leaders have the information they need.
- ☐ Scripture readers, ushers, greeters, technical teams, and other worship participants are scheduled.
- ☐ Worship bulletins and announcements use current leadership information.
- ☐ The person authorized to make worship decisions is identified.
- ☐ Plans exist for unexpected illness or cancellation by a scheduled leader.
- ☐ Upcoming baptisms, weddings, funerals, communion services, or special services have been reviewed.
- ☐ The congregation's grief and uncertainty may be acknowledged without turning every worship service into another farewell service.
- ☐ Worship does not make promises about the congregation's future leadership before the appropriate discernment process begins.

Upcoming Worship Responsibilities

Date	Service or Occasion	Leader	Special Requirements	Confirmed
				☐
				☐
				☐
				☐

Part Five: Support and Supervise Staff

The first days after a pastor's departure can be especially demanding for staff members. They may carry additional work while also experiencing grief, uncertainty, or concern about their own roles.

The congregation should not expect staff to absorb all displaced pastoral responsibilities simply because they remain present.

Immediate Staff Leadership

Person supervising staff during this period:

Person handling personnel questions:

Person approving leave, schedules, and expenses:

Person to whom staff may bring concerns:

Staff Start-Up Checklist

- ☐ Every staff member knows who now supervises their work.
- ☐ Staff members know who may assign new responsibilities.
- ☐ Staff members know who approves schedules, leave, purchases, and expenses.
- ☐ A staff meeting has been scheduled soon after the pastor's departure.
- ☐ Staff members have received the temporary authority map.
- ☐ Responsibilities formerly held by the pastor have been reviewed.
- ☐ Displaced work has been assigned intentionally rather than assumed.
- ☐ Work that can be paused or discontinued has been identified.
- ☐ Staff workloads have been reviewed for sustainability.
- ☐ No staff member is expected to perform duties beyond their authority, training, employment agreement, or compensation without appropriate review.
- ☐ Confidential personnel concerns have been directed to the proper person or body.
- ☐ Staff members know how pastoral-care requests should be handled.
- ☐ Staff members have been instructed not to use the departing pastor as an unofficial supervisor or decision-maker.

- ☐ Staff members have an appropriate place to ask questions and express concerns.

Immediate Staff Meeting Agenda

Use this agenda for the first staff meeting after the pastor's departure.

1. Acknowledge the Change

- Name that the pastoral relationship has ended.
- Recognize that staff members may be carrying varied emotions.
- Allow brief reflection without requiring personal disclosure.

2. Review Temporary Authority

- Who supervises staff?
- Who makes decisions?
- Who approves expenditures, leave, and scheduling?
- Where should unresolved questions go?

3. Review Essential Work

- What must continue?
- What needs immediate attention?
- What can wait?
- What should be paused?
- What work should not be transferred to staff?

4. Review Communication

- Who speaks for the congregation?
- How should questions about the departing pastor be answered?
- How are rumors or inaccurate reports handled?
- Who communicates changes to members?

5. Review Pastoral Care

- Who receives requests?
- Who provides care?
- What is the emergency procedure?
- What confidentiality practices must be maintained?

6. Identify Staff Needs

- What information is missing?
- Where are responsibilities unclear?
- Who is carrying an unsustainable workload?
- When will the arrangement be reviewed?

Staff meeting date: _____

Follow-up date: _____

Part Six: Secure Records, Property, and Access

The congregation should be able to continue its work without depending on the departing pastor for routine access. At the same time, records and confidential information must remain secure.

Physical Property and Access

- ☐ Building keys have been returned, transferred, or deactivated.
- ☐ Office keys and access cards have been reviewed.
- ☐ Alarm codes have been changed if appropriate.
- ☐ Safes, locked files, and secure storage areas are accessible to authorized leaders.
- ☐ Church-owned computers, telephones, tablets, and other equipment have been returned.
- ☐ Church-owned books, files, credit cards, purchasing cards, and other property have been returned or accounted for.
- ☐ Personal property belonging to the departing pastor has been removed or arrangements have been made for its retrieval.

Digital Access

- ☐ Congregational email accounts are accessible to authorized persons.
- ☐ Administrative access to the church website has been transferred.
- ☐ Social-media administration has been transferred.
- ☐ File-storage and document-sharing access has been reviewed.
- ☐ Online worship and streaming accounts are accessible.
- ☐ Church management or membership systems are accessible.
- ☐ Financial and donation systems are accessible only to authorized persons.
- ☐ Calendar and scheduling systems have been transferred.
- ☐ Passwords have been changed where appropriate.
- ☐ Multifactor authentication is directed to current authorized users.
- ☐ Automatic email forwarding has been reviewed and adjusted.
- ☐ The departing pastor's access has been discontinued in accordance with policy.

Records and Confidentiality

- ☐ Official congregational records remain with the congregation.

- ☐ Pastoral records have been transferred or handled according to denominational and legal requirements.
- ☐ Confidential pastoral-care information is secured.
- ☐ Personnel records are secured.
- ☐ Financial records are secured.
- ☐ Records containing personal information are accessible only to authorized individuals.
- ☐ No leader has copied or distributed confidential material merely for convenience.
- ☐ Questions about record ownership or retention have been referred to the appropriate denominational, legal, or professional authority.

Unresolved Access Matters

Account, Record, or Property	Action Needed	Responsible Person	Due Date
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Part Seven: Communicate Essential Information

The congregation needs enough information to know what has changed, what remains stable, and where to go for help. Immediate communication should be clear and practical. It does not need to answer every question about the future.

Essential Congregational Message

The first post-departure communication should ordinarily include:

- confirmation that the pastor's service has concluded;
- gratitude appropriate to the relationship and circumstances;
- the name of the person or body providing temporary leadership;
- instructions for requesting pastoral care;
- current worship arrangements;
- office contact information;
- any immediate schedule changes;
- a reminder of appropriate post-departure boundaries; and
- assurance that additional information will be provided when it is available.

Communication Checklist

- ☐ A first post-departure message has been prepared.
- ☐ The governing body has approved the message if required.
- ☐ The message identifies current leadership accurately.
- ☐ Pastoral-care contact information is included.
- ☐ Worship information is current.

- ☐ Office hours and contact information are current.
- ☐ Staff members know how to respond to common questions.
- ☐ The message avoids speculation about future pastoral leadership.
- ☐ The message does not disclose confidential personnel or pastoral information.
- ☐ The message does not invite members to continue seeking pastoral care from the departed pastor.
- ☐ Website, voicemail, email, newsletter, and social-media information are consistent.
- ☐ A person has been assigned to correct inaccurate public information.

Common Questions and Approved Responses

Question Members May Ask	Brief, Accurate Response	Person Authorized to Provide More Information
Who is leading the congregation now?		
Whom do I call for pastoral care?		
Who will preach?		
What happens in an emergency?		
May I contact the former pastor?		
When will the next pastor arrive?		
What happens next?		
Other:		

When the answer is not yet known, leaders may say:

That decision has not yet been made. We will share accurate information when it is available.

A clear acknowledgment of uncertainty is better than an unofficial promise.

Part Eight: Prepare for Emergencies and Time-Sensitive Events

Transitions do not suspend ordinary congregational life. Leaders should know what to do if a serious pastoral, operational, financial, or building emergency occurs.

Emergency Contacts

Need	Primary Contact	Backup Contact	Telephone
Pastoral emergency			
Funeral or death			
Building emergency			

Need	Primary Contact	Backup Contact	Telephone
Security concern			
Staff or personnel emergency			
Financial concern			
Technology failure			
Denominational consultation			
Insurance claim			
Legal question			

Emergency Readiness Checklist

- ☐ The church office has an updated emergency contact list.
 - ☐ Staff members know who must be notified.
 - ☐ Leaders know who may authorize emergency expenditures.
 - ☐ Funeral and memorial-service procedures are available.
 - ☐ Building-security procedures are current.
 - ☐ Insurance contact information is accessible.
 - ☐ Necessary legal and denominational contacts are known.
 - ☐ A backup exists if the primary temporary leader is unavailable.
 - ☐ Emergency communications can be sent without relying on the departing pastor.
-

Part Nine: Maintain Post-Departure Boundaries

The end of the pastoral relationship does not mean that affection disappears. It does mean that the former pastor no longer serves as pastor, supervisor, decision-maker, or private adviser to the congregation.

Members may need gentle reminders, especially when an urgent need arises or when familiar habits continue automatically.

Boundary Checklist

- ☐ Congregational leaders understand applicable denominational expectations regarding former pastors.
- ☐ Staff members know not to seek supervision or approval from the former pastor.
- ☐ Members have been told whom to contact for pastoral care.
- ☐ Leaders know how to respond if the former pastor is asked to perform a wedding, funeral, baptism, counseling role, or other pastoral act.

- ☐ A person has been designated to address boundary concerns.
- ☐ The congregation's communication systems no longer direct requests to the former pastor.
- ☐ The former pastor is not included in internal leadership discussions unless formally and appropriately authorized.
- ☐ The former pastor is not being asked to interpret every unfinished decision or solve routine problems.
- ☐ Confidential information is not being shared with the former pastor after the pastoral relationship has ended.
- ☐ Leaders will respond to boundary crossings directly, calmly, and without public shaming.

A Simple Boundary Response

When a member asks the former pastor to resume a pastoral role, an appropriate response may be:

It makes sense to turn to someone you know and trust. Because the pastoral relationship has ended, this request belongs with the person now providing pastoral care. We will help you make that connection.

When the congregation believes an exception may be appropriate, leaders should first consult denominational policy and the person currently responsible for pastoral leadership. The former pastor should not be placed in the position of deciding independently whether to return.

Boundary Concerns Requiring Attention

Concern	Person Responsible	Response Needed	Follow-Up Date
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For fuller guidance and additional scenarios, see FM 8.1 — Boundary Conversation Guide and Scenarios

Part Ten: Review Unfinished and Unexpected Matters

Even a careful handoff will not anticipate everything. During the first weeks after departure, leaders may discover missing information, unclear responsibilities, incomplete projects, or commitments that were not previously known.

Do not reconstruct every detail of the former pastor's work. Decide what requires action now.

When an Unfinished Matter Appears

Ask:

1. Does this require immediate action?
2. Who has authority to address it?
3. What reliable information is already available?
4. Is confidential information involved?
5. Can the matter wait for temporary or transitional pastoral leadership?
6. Does it require denominational, legal, financial, or personnel guidance?
7. Is contacting the former pastor truly necessary and appropriate?
8. What decision can current leaders make without reopening the former pastoral relationship?

Unfinished Matters Log

Matter Discovered	Urgency	Assigned To	Action or Decision	Completed
				☐
				☐
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If Contact with the Former Pastor Appears Necessary

Before making contact, confirm:

- ☐ The information cannot be found in existing records.
- ☐ The matter is sufficiently important to justify contact.
- ☐ Contact is consistent with denominational policy and any agreed boundaries.
- ☐ One authorized person will make the contact.
- ☐ The request is limited to a specific factual question.
- ☐ The former pastor is not being asked to resume authority, provide pastoral care, or decide the matter.
- ☐ The answer will be documented appropriately for future use.

A suitable request might be:

We are trying to locate the final agreement related to the building repair scheduled for next month. We have checked the congregational files but have not found it. Can you tell us where that document was stored?

The contact should end when the necessary factual information has been received.

Part Eleven: First-Week Review

Complete this review approximately one week after the pastor's departure.

Review date: _____

Participants:

Leadership and Authority

- ☐ Temporary authority is functioning as intended.
- ☐ Staff and ministry leaders know where decisions belong.

- ☐ No significant responsibility is being left unattended.
- ☐ No person or group is exercising authority that was not assigned.

Pastoral Care

- ☐ Members can request pastoral care easily.
- ☐ Urgent care needs are being addressed.
- ☐ Funeral, hospital, and emergency procedures are working.
- ☐ Confidential information remains protected.

Worship

- ☐ Worship leadership is confirmed for the coming weeks.
- ☐ Sacramental or ordinance responsibilities are covered.
- ☐ Worship teams have the information they need.

Staff

- ☐ Staff supervision is clear.
- ☐ Workloads remain manageable.
- ☐ Displaced responsibilities have been reviewed.
- ☐ Staff concerns are being heard by the proper person or body.

Administration and Communication

- ☐ Contact information is accurate.
- ☐ Records and digital systems are accessible.
- ☐ The congregation is receiving consistent information.
- ☐ Questions and rumors are being addressed appropriately.

Boundaries

- ☐ Members know whom to contact instead of the former pastor.
- ☐ Staff members are not using the former pastor as an unofficial supervisor.
- ☐ Any boundary concerns have been addressed.

First-Week Concerns

Concern	Action Needed	Responsible Person	Due Date
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Part Twelve: First-Month Review

Complete this review approximately one month after the pastor's departure, or sooner if the temporary arrangement is unstable.

Review date: _____

Participants:

What Is Working?

What Remains Unclear?

What Is Placing Too Much Weight on Staff or Lay Leaders?

What Essential Work Is Not Being Done?

What Work Can Be Paused, Simplified, or Shared?

What Requires Denominational or Outside Guidance?

First-Month Checklist

- ☐ Temporary leadership remains appropriately authorized.
- ☐ The arrangement has been adjusted where necessary.
- ☐ Pastoral-care coverage is sustainable.
- ☐ Worship leadership is stable for the immediate future.
- ☐ Staff supervision and workload have been reviewed.
- ☐ Financial and administrative controls are functioning.
- ☐ Congregational communication remains accurate and timely.
- ☐ Records and access issues have been resolved.
- ☐ Boundary expectations are being honored.
- ☐ Unfinished matters have been assigned, deferred, or released.
- ☐ Leaders understand the difference between immediate stabilization and the deeper transition work still to come.
- ☐ A date has been established for the next leadership review.

Next review date: _____

Part Thirteen: Immediate Transition Summary

Complete this page after the initial start-up work has been reviewed.

Current Pastoral Leadership
_____**Current Staff Supervisor**
_____**Primary Pastoral-Care Contact**
_____**Person Responsible for Worship Coordination**
_____**Person Responsible for Congregational Communication**

Person Responsible for Emergencies

Denominational Contact

Most Important Unfinished Matter

Next Required Decision

Date of Next Review

Final Completion Checklist

Before concluding the immediate post-departure start-up process, confirm:

- ☐ The former pastor's authority and responsibilities have ended clearly.
 - ☐ Temporary authority has been established.
 - ☐ Pastoral care is available.
 - ☐ Worship leadership is arranged.
 - ☐ Staff members are supervised and supported.
 - ☐ Essential administrative systems are functioning.
 - ☐ Records, property, and digital access are secure.
 - ☐ Emergency procedures are current.
 - ☐ The congregation knows whom to contact.
 - ☐ Post-departure boundaries are understood.
 - ☐ Unfinished matters have been assigned or appropriately deferred.
 - ☐ Temporary arrangements have scheduled review dates.
 - ☐ Leaders are prepared to move from immediate stabilization into the next stage of the transition without rushing ahead of the congregation.
-
-

A Final Word

The days after a pastor leaves may feel quiet, unsettled, or exposed. Familiar patterns have ended, and what comes next is not yet clear.

Leaders need not resolve the whole transition in these first weeks. Their work is to provide care, clarify authority, sustain essential leadership, and communicate honestly.

The congregation has said goodbye. For now, it can attend to what is necessary, release what cannot yet be resolved, and let the next part of the journey begin in its own time.

FM 8.1 — Boundary Conversation Guide and Scenarios

Purpose of This Resource

When a pastoral relationship ends, affection, friendship, family ties, and community connections may continue. Pastoral authority and responsibility end.

This resource helps departing pastors, leaders, staff, and members speak clearly about post-departure boundaries. It offers a process for those conversations, sample language, and scenarios for leadership discussion.

Boundaries do not erase relationships or punish people for caring. Healthy boundaries:

- confirm that the former pastor is no longer responsible for the congregation;
- protect the congregation's freedom to receive new leadership;
- protect staff from divided supervision and competing loyalties;
- protect the former pastor from being drawn back into pastoral work;
- help members seek care from those currently authorized to provide it;
- reduce private influence and unofficial decision-making;
- honor confidentiality; and
- allow pastor and congregation to enter their separate futures with integrity.

Adapt this resource to the congregation's polity, denominational requirements, community setting, and the circumstances of the departure.

Part One: Boundary Information

Congregation: _____

Departing pastor: _____

Pastor's final day of service: _____

Date the pastoral relationship formally ends: _____

Person responsible for communicating boundary expectations:

Person responsible for responding to boundary concerns:

Temporary or transitional pastoral leader:

Denominational or judicatory contact:

Applicable denominational policy:

Date boundary expectations were reviewed: _____

Part Two: The Central Boundary

The central post-departure boundary is simple:

After the pastoral relationship ends, the former pastor no longer serves as pastor of the congregation.

This means the former pastor ordinarily no longer:

- provides pastoral care to members;
- presides at weddings, funerals, baptisms, Communion, or other pastoral occasions for the congregation;
- supervises staff;
- advises congregational officers privately;
- participates in governing-body decisions;
- receives confidential information about members;
- intervenes in congregational conflict;
- comments privately on current leaders;
- influences the search for or calling of future pastors;
- interprets the congregation to new leadership;
- seeks support for preserving former programs or priorities;
- acts as the congregation's representative in the community; or
- functions through informal relationships as though still holding pastoral office.

A former pastor may continue to care about the congregation. Caring does not require continuing to exercise a pastoral role.

Part Three: Distinguish Affection, Friendship, and Pastoral Relationship

Not every continuing relationship is automatically inappropriate. The important question is what role the relationship is being asked to carry.

Affection

Affection may remain after the pastoral relationship ends. Pastor and members may continue to remember one another warmly and pray for one another.

Affection does not grant pastoral authority.

Enduring Christian affection may continue, but it is distinct from a continuing pastoral relationship and does not carry pastoral expectations.

Friendship

Some genuine friendships may have developed during the pastorate. Whether and how they continue may depend on:

- denominational policy;
- the length and character of the relationship;
- the size of the community;
- the needs of the congregation;
- the arrival of new pastoral leadership;
- differences in authority created during the pastorate; and
- whether the relationship can continue without carrying pastoral expectations.
- When the former pastor remains nearby, ordinary community encounters may continue, but proximity does not restore pastoral authority or create an exception to the agreed boundaries.

A relationship called “friendship” may still function pastorally if the former pastor is asked to counsel, interpret events, keep congregational confidences, validate decisions, or provide spiritual authority.

Pastoral Relationship

A pastoral relationship includes authority, responsibility, trust, and obligations that do not belong to ordinary friendship. When the pastorate ends, those responsibilities must be released.

A Discernment Question

Before continuing or accepting a contact, ask:

Would this interaction reasonably cause the member, former pastor, staff, congregation, or current pastoral leader to experience the former pastor as still serving pastorally?

If the answer may be yes, greater distance, clarification, or authorization is needed.

Part Four: Establish the Congregation’s Boundary Agreement

Boundary expectations should be established before the pastor’s departure whenever possible.

Policy Review

- ☐ Denominational requirements have been reviewed.
- ☐ Governing documents and personnel policies have been reviewed.
- ☐ The departing pastor understands the expectations.
- ☐ The governing body understands the expectations.
- ☐ Staff members understand the expectations.
- ☐ The temporary or transitional pastor understands the expectations.
- ☐ The congregation has received clear information.
- ☐ Expectations for the pastor’s spouse, partner, or family have been discussed where appropriate.
- ☐ Expectations for social media and digital communication have been discussed.

- ☐ A process exists for considering exceptions.
- ☐ The process also covers unexpected requests, urgent circumstances, and who may authorize a response.
- ☐ A person or body has authority to address concerns.

Post-Departure Boundary Agreement

Record the expectations that apply.

Pastoral Care

The former pastor will:

The former pastor will not:

Weddings, Funerals, Baptisms, and Other Services

The former pastor may participate only when:

Authorization must come from:

Congregational Events

The former pastor may attend when:

The former pastor should not attend when:

Staff Relationships

The former pastor and staff have agreed that:

Governance and Decision-Making

The former pastor will have no role except:

Social Media and Digital Contact

The agreed expectations are:

Continuing Friendships

The agreed expectations are:

Length of Any Requested Period of Separation

Review or Reconsideration Date, if Applicable

Other Denominational Requirements

Acknowledgment

Departing pastor: _____

Governing-body representative: _____

Denominational representative, if required: _____

Date: _____

This acknowledgment records a shared understanding. It does not replace formal denominational requirements.

Part Five: Communicate Boundaries to the Congregation

The pastor and congregational leaders should communicate the same message. If leaders offer inconsistent explanations, members may interpret boundaries as optional or personal.

What Members Need to Know

Members should know:

- the date the pastoral relationship ends;
- that the former pastor will no longer provide pastoral care;
- whom to contact for pastoral care;
- how weddings, funerals, baptisms, and other pastoral occasions will be handled;
- that the former pastor will not advise the congregation privately;
- that these boundaries protect everyone involved;
- that continuing affection is not being denied; and

- that denominational policy may govern exceptions.

Sample Congregational Announcement

Reverend _____'s pastoral relationship with this congregation will conclude on _____.

After that date, Reverend _____ will no longer serve as our pastor or provide pastoral care, counseling, ceremonies, supervision, or guidance concerning congregational decisions. Requests for pastoral care should be directed to _____ at _____.

These boundaries do not deny the affection and gratitude that have grown during our ministry together. They allow Reverend _____ to leave fully and give this congregation freedom to receive the ministry of those who will serve after the departure.

If an unusual circumstance raises a question about the former pastor's participation, please contact _____. Any exception must be considered through the congregation's and denomination's established process rather than arranged privately.

Sample Statement from the Departing Pastor

I am grateful for the relationships and ministry we have shared. Because my service as your pastor is ending, I will no longer be available for pastoral care, counseling, weddings, funerals, baptisms, congregational decisions, or other pastoral responsibilities after _____.

This boundary is part of leaving faithfully. It protects the congregation's future leadership and allows me to release the responsibilities of being your pastor. Please direct pastoral needs to _____.

I will continue to care about you and pray for you, but I will no longer be your pastor. I trust God to provide faithful care and leadership for both the congregation and me in the season ahead.

Communication Checklist

- ☐ The pastor and governing body have agreed on the message.
- ☐ The message identifies the formal ending date.
- ☐ It distinguishes affection from pastoral responsibility.
- ☐ It tells members whom to contact for care.
- ☐ It addresses ceremonies and significant life events.
- ☐ It explains how exceptions are considered.
- ☐ It avoids blaming either pastor or congregation.
- ☐ It does not promise that the former pastor will return after a brief waiting period.
- ☐ It is consistent across worship announcements, letters, email, website, and staff responses.
- ☐ Members have a place to ask clarifying questions.

Part Six: A Process for Boundary Conversations

Boundary conversations are most effective when they are timely, direct, brief, and kind.

Before the Conversation

Ask:

1. What specific behavior or request needs to be addressed?
2. What boundary or policy applies?
3. Who is the appropriate person to have the conversation?
4. Is there an immediate pastoral need that must be redirected?
5. Does confidential information need protection?
6. Is this an ordinary misunderstanding or part of a repeated pattern?
7. Is there a difference in authority or vulnerability requiring special care?
8. Does denominational, legal, or professional guidance need to be consulted?

During the Conversation

A useful boundary conversation has five movements.

1. Acknowledge the Relationship or Need

I understand why you reached out to someone you know and trust.

2. Name the Changed Reality

Reverend _____ is no longer serving as pastor of this congregation.

3. State the Boundary

The former pastor cannot provide pastoral care or make decisions for the congregation.

4. Redirect the Request

Please contact _____, who is now responsible for that care.

5. Offer Help with the Next Step

I can help you make that connection today.

After the Conversation

- ☐ Provide the promised referral or information.
- ☐ Document the conversation if the matter involves staff, repeated concerns, confidentiality, or significant risk.
- ☐ Inform the appropriate leader.
- ☐ Follow up with anyone whose pastoral need may remain unmet.
- ☐ Consult denominational leadership if the concern continues.

Part Seven: A Quick Boundary Response

Use this brief pattern when a longer explanation is unnecessary.

I understand why this matters to you. The pastoral relationship with Reverend _____ has ended, so that request needs to go to _____. I will help you make the connection.

For a repeated request:

We have already discussed this boundary. Reverend _____ is no longer authorized to serve in a pastoral role here. Please direct this request to _____.

For a request involving congregational decisions:

The former pastor no longer has a role in this decision. It belongs to the congregation's current authorized leaders.

For a confidential matter:

That information should not be shared with the former pastor. Please speak with _____, who is currently responsible for pastoral care.

Part Eight: Scenario 1 — A Member Requests Pastoral Care

Situation

A member contacts the former pastor during a family crisis and asks for prayer, counseling, or a hospital visit.

Boundary Concern

The need is real, but responding as pastor may restore the former pastoral relationship and prevent the member from receiving care from current leadership.

Suggested Response from the Former Pastor

I am sorry that you are facing this. Because I am no longer your pastor, I cannot provide the pastoral care you are requesting. Please contact _____ at _____. With your permission, I can send a brief message asking that person to contact you, but I will not share details beyond what you authorize.

Leadership Response

- ☐ Make certain the member receives timely care.
- ☐ Do not shame the member for reaching toward a familiar pastor.
- ☐ Remind the congregation how to request care.
- ☐ Review whether the current care system is easy to access.

Discussion Questions

1. How can the member's need be met without restoring the former pastor's role?
 2. What may the former pastor communicate without violating confidentiality?
 3. Does the congregation's pastoral-care system need improvement?
-

Part Nine: Scenario 2 — Hospitalization or an Emergency

Situation

A former pastor learns through a friend or social media that a member has been hospitalized. The pastor wants to visit.

Boundary Concern

Compassionate concern does not itself authorize a pastoral visit. An uninvited visit may confuse the member, family, hospital staff, and current pastoral leader.

Suggested Response

The former pastor may send a simple personal message, if appropriate:

I heard that you have been hospitalized and wanted you to know that I am thinking of you. I trust that the congregation's current pastoral-care leaders are supporting you. I will respect the boundaries of my former role and will not visit unless the appropriate current pastor invites me to do so.

Leadership Guidance

- ☐ Current pastoral leadership should provide care.
 - ☐ Any invitation to the former pastor should come through the authorized current leader.
 - ☐ The member's wishes and condition should be considered.
 - ☐ Participation should be clearly personal or specifically authorized.
 - ☐ Confidential medical information should not be shared unnecessarily.
-

Part Ten: Scenario 3 — A Funeral or Memorial Service

Situation

A family asks the former pastor to conduct the funeral of a member with whom the pastor had a close relationship.

Boundary Concern

The request may feel deeply personal, but funerals are pastoral acts within the life of the congregation. Private arrangements can displace current leadership and undermine the new pastoral relationship.

Suggested Response from the Former Pastor

I am honored that you asked, and I share your sorrow. Because I am no longer pastor of the congregation, I cannot independently agree to conduct the service. Please speak with _____, who is now responsible for pastoral care. If that pastor and the congregation believe my participation would be appropriate, they may contact me.

Possible Authorized Participation

With appropriate approval, the former pastor might:

- attend as a guest;
- offer a brief personal remembrance;
- read scripture;
- offer a prayer;
- assist the current pastor; or
- participate in another clearly limited role.

The current authorized pastor or presider should ordinarily retain responsibility for planning and leading the service.

Discussion Questions

1. Who has authority to invite the former pastor?
 2. What role would honor the family without displacing current leadership?
 3. How will the role be explained to the congregation?
-

Part Eleven: Scenario 4 — A Wedding

Situation

Before the pastor's departure, a couple asked the pastor to officiate at a wedding scheduled after the pastoral relationship ends.

Boundary Concern

A prior conversation or informal promise does not automatically preserve pastoral authority after departure.

Planning Before Departure

- ☐ Identify weddings scheduled after the pastor's final day.
- ☐ Review denominational requirements.
- ☐ Tell each couple clearly whether the departing pastor may participate.
- ☐ Transfer planning information with the couple's consent.
- ☐ Introduce the couple to the current authorized pastor.
- ☐ Avoid leaving the couple to negotiate the issue after the departure.

Suggested Response

When we began planning, I was serving as your pastor. Because that pastoral relationship will end before your wedding, we need to involve the person who will then have responsibility for the congregation. I cannot promise to officiate independently after my departure. We will clarify the appropriate arrangements before I leave.

If Participation Is Authorized

Define:

- who will preside;
 - who provides premarital care;
 - who completes legal documentation;
 - whose authority covers the ceremony;
 - how the former pastor will be introduced; and
 - who handles follow-up responsibilities.
-

Part Twelve: Scenario 5 — Baptism, Confirmation, or Another Milestone

Situation

A family wants the former pastor to return for a baptism, confirmation, anniversary, installation, or other significant congregational event.

Boundary Concern

The desire may arise from affection, but returning to perform a pastoral act can imply that important moments still belong to the former pastor.

Suggested Response from a Congregational Leader

We know Reverend _____ is important to your family. This milestone belongs within the congregation's current ministry and to those now serving as its pastoral leaders. We can consider another appropriate form of acknowledgment, but we will not arrange pastoral participation privately.

Possible Alternatives

- invite the former pastor to send a personal note;
 - include an appropriate previous gift or memory;
 - acknowledge the former pastor's earlier role without inviting present leadership;
 - invite attendance as a guest after consultation; or
 - wait until current leadership has determined what is appropriate.
-

Part Thirteen: Scenario 6 — A Staff Member Seeks Advice

Situation

A staff member contacts the former pastor for advice about a decision, conflict, workload, or new supervisor.

Boundary Concern

Even when described as friendship, the conversation may recreate the former supervisory relationship and establish a back channel into the congregation.

Suggested Response from the Former Pastor

I care about you, but I am no longer your supervisor or pastor. It would not be appropriate for me to advise you about current staff or congregational matters. Please take this concern to _____. If you need independent professional support, seek someone who is not connected to my former role in the congregation.

Staff Guidance

Staff members should not ask the former pastor to:

- interpret the governing body's decisions;
- evaluate new leadership;
- approve a course of action;
- preserve a former program;
- explain what the former pastor "would have done";
- mediate a current conflict;
- receive confidential personnel information; or
- carry messages back to congregational leaders.

Leadership Response

- ☐ Clarify current supervision.
 - ☐ Make certain staff have a safe place to raise concerns.
 - ☐ Address workload or personnel issues through proper channels.
 - ☐ Do not treat every accidental contact as disloyalty.
 - ☐ Respond promptly if a repeated back channel develops.
-

Part Fourteen: Scenario 7 — A Governing-Body Member Requests Advice

Situation

A governing-body member privately asks the former pastor what the congregation should do about a current decision.

Boundary Concern

The former pastor's influence may carry significant weight even without formal authority. Private advice can divide leadership and interfere with the congregation's ability to make its own decisions.

Suggested Response from the Former Pastor

I no longer have responsibility or authority for decisions in the congregation, so I should not advise you on this matter. Please work through the governing body and the congregation's current pastoral or denominational leadership.

Suggested Response from the Governing-Body Chair

Decisions now belong to the congregation's current leaders. We will not seek or use private direction from the former pastor.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did the leader feel unable to use the current decision-making process?
 2. Has temporary authority been communicated clearly?
 3. Does the concern need denominational consultation?
-

Part Fifteen: Scenario 8 — Members Report Congregational News

Situation

Members regularly send the former pastor updates about attendance, finances, staff, conflicts, or the transition process.

Boundary Concern

News-sharing may become a form of continued involvement, especially when members seek the former pastor's reaction or approval.

Suggested Response from the Former Pastor

Thank you for thinking of me. I need to step back from internal news and decisions so that the congregation and I can live fully into this ending. Please do not send me reports about staff, leadership, finances, conflict, or the search process.

Suggested Reminder to Members

Reverend _____ no longer has responsibility for congregational life and should not be placed in the position of receiving internal reports or commenting on current decisions.

Ordinary public news is different from private reports. The question is whether the information invites the former pastor back into knowledge, influence, or responsibility belonging to the pastoral role.

Part Sixteen: Scenario 9 — Social Media Contact

Situation

The former pastor remains connected with many members on social media. Members tag the pastor in congregational disputes, request prayer through private messages, or ask for comments about current leadership.

Boundary Concern

Digital access can allow the former pastoral relationship to continue invisibly and continuously.

Social Media Plan

The former pastor should decide whether to:

- ☐ Remain connected while declining pastoral communication
- ☐ Mute congregational accounts temporarily
- ☐ Leave internal congregational groups
- ☐ Remove administrative access
- ☐ Limit who may send direct messages
- ☐ Unfollow accounts focused on internal congregational matters
- ☐ Pause posting about the congregation
- ☐ Use a standard response to pastoral requests
- ☐ Follow denominational guidance requiring a period of separation

Suggested Digital Response

I am no longer serving as pastor of _____ congregation and cannot provide pastoral care or comment on congregational matters through social media. Please contact _____ at _____.

Digital Boundaries

The former pastor should not:

- moderate congregational groups;
 - comment on staff or leadership decisions;
 - respond publicly to rumors;
 - invite members to share inside information;
 - post indirect criticism;
 - use reactions or coded comments to signal sides in a conflict;
 - provide pastoral counseling through private messages; or
 - use social media to preserve influence.
-

Part Seventeen: Scenario 10 — A Chance Meeting in the Community

Situation

The former pastor and a congregational member meet at a store, school event, restaurant, community meeting, or neighborhood gathering.

Boundary Concern

Not every contact is a boundary violation. The question is whether the interaction becomes pastoral.

Appropriate Contact

The former pastor may ordinarily:

- greet the person warmly;
- ask general social questions;
- acknowledge a shared community connection;
- express ordinary human concern; and
- conclude the interaction naturally.

When the Conversation Turns Pastoral

The former pastor may say:

I am glad to see you. Because I am no longer your pastor, I should not enter into a pastoral conversation about the congregation or your care. Please contact _____, who can support you.

Small-Community Considerations

In a small town, rural community, family network, or culturally close community, complete social separation may be impossible and unnecessarily harsh. Healthy boundaries may require role clarity rather than physical absence.

The former pastor can remain a neighbor without remaining the congregation's pastor.

Part Eighteen: Scenario 11 — The Former Pastor Attends Worship

Situation

The former pastor wants to attend worship at the congregation after leaving.

Boundary Concern

The former pastor's presence may affect worshipers, staff, current leaders, and the new pastor. Members may continue treating the former pastor as the primary pastoral figure.

Questions to Consider

1. What does denominational policy require?
2. Has a period of separation been requested?
3. Why does the former pastor wish to attend?
4. How recently did the pastoral relationship end?
5. Is temporary or new leadership established?
6. Is the congregation experiencing conflict?
7. Can the former pastor attend without becoming a center of attention?
8. Can members respect the current pastor's role?
9. How will the former pastor respond to requests for pastoral conversation?
10. Would worship elsewhere better support a healthy ending?

Possible Leadership Response

We value the ministry you shared here. At this stage of the transition, your regular presence would make it harder for the congregation and its current leaders to establish new relationships. We ask that you worship elsewhere during this period. We can review the matter after _____ in consultation with denominational leadership.

A specific period of separation should not be treated as an automatic permission to return when the period expires. Readiness should be discerned rather than assumed.

Part Nineteen: Scenario 12 — The Former Pastor Is Invited to a Congregational Event

Situation

A ministry group invites the former pastor to a meal, anniversary, fundraiser, class, concert, or holiday event.

Boundary Concern

Attendance may be ordinary and appropriate in some circumstances. In others, it may turn the event into a reunion with the former pastor or undermine current leadership.

Before Issuing an Invitation

Ask:

- Who has authority to invite the former pastor?
- Has current pastoral leadership been consulted?
- What role is the former pastor expected to have?
- Will the former pastor be introduced as a guest or treated as pastor?
- Is the invitation likely to create divided loyalties?
- Is the congregation ready?
- Is the event public or internal?
- Does denominational policy permit attendance?
- Would declining the invitation better protect the transition?

Suggested Response from the Former Pastor

Thank you for the invitation. Before I accept, please consult the congregation's current pastor and appropriate leaders. I do not want my attendance to interfere with the congregation's transition or current pastoral relationships.

Part Twenty: Scenario 13 — A Former Pastor Is Asked to Return as a Guest Preacher

Situation

The congregation wants the former pastor to preach for an anniversary, special event, or pastoral absence.

Boundary Concern

Preaching is a pastoral act carrying public authority. An invitation may be appropriate only after sufficient time, clear current leadership, and proper authorization.

Questions for Discernment

- ☐ Is the invitation consistent with denominational policy?
- ☐ Did it originate with current authorized leadership?
- ☐ Is the current pastor fully supportive?

- ☐ Is the congregation stable enough to receive the former pastor as a guest?
- ☐ Is the purpose clear?
- ☐ Will the former pastor avoid commenting on current decisions or comparing ministries?
- ☐ Will the congregation understand that the former pastor is not resuming a pastoral role?
- ☐ Is the invitation free from pressure by a faction or group?

Suggested Introduction if Authorized

Today we welcome Reverend _____ as our guest preacher. Reverend _____ formerly served this congregation and joins us today at the invitation of our current pastoral and congregational leadership.

Part Twenty-One: Scenario 14 — The Former Pastor Criticizes Current Leadership

Situation

The former pastor privately or publicly criticizes the transitional pastor, new pastor, staff, governing body, or congregation's decisions.

Boundary Concern

Former pastoral authority can give these comments unusual power. Criticism may create factions, damage trust, and interfere with current leadership.

Initial Response

Your former role gives your words particular influence in this congregation. Commenting on current leaders or decisions is inconsistent with the boundaries of your departure. We ask you to stop these conversations and direct any legitimate concern through _____.

If the Pattern Continues

- ☐ Document specific incidents.
- ☐ Consult the governing body.
- ☐ Consult denominational leadership.
- ☐ Correct inaccurate public information when necessary.
- ☐ Support staff or leaders affected by the comments.
- ☐ Avoid conducting a public argument with the former pastor.
- ☐ Establish firmer limits on contact or participation.
- ☐ Use formal accountability processes if required.

Part Twenty-Two: Scenario 15 — Members Compare Every Decision with the Former Pastor

Situation

Members respond to new leadership by saying, “That is not how Pastor _____ did it,” or “We should ask what our former pastor thinks.”

Boundary Concern

The former pastor may not be initiating the comparison, but the congregation is still using the former ministry to limit present leadership.

Suggested Response from Current Leadership

Reverend _____ served faithfully in a particular season. That pastoral relationship has ended, and our current decisions belong to the leaders responsible now. We can be grateful for the past without requiring present ministry to reproduce it.

Leadership Practice

- ☐ Acknowledge the value behind the former practice.
 - ☐ Explain who now has authority.
 - ☐ Evaluate the current question on its own merits.
 - ☐ Do not criticize the former pastor to establish current authority.
 - ☐ Do not require the new pastor to compete with the former pastor.
-

Part Twenty-Three: Scenario 16 — The Former Pastor’s Family Remains Connected

Situation

The former pastor’s spouse, partner, children, or other family members have friendships and activities within the congregation.

Boundary Concern

Family members did not hold the pastoral office merely by association. Yet they may become channels through which information, influence, or pastoral expectations continue.

Guiding Principles

- Do not treat family members as extensions of the former pastor.
- Do not require them to end genuine friendships automatically.
- Do not use them to carry messages to the former pastor.
- Do not ask them for information about the pastor.
- Do not include them in confidential congregational discussions because of their former connection.

- Do not expect them to defend the former pastor's ministry.
- Do not expect them to report congregational news.
- Consider the needs of children and youth carefully.
- Follow denominational policy where it addresses household participation.

Suggested Conversation

We value the relationships you have formed here. We also want to protect you from being placed between the congregation and the former pastor. We will not ask you to carry messages, explain decisions, or report congregational matters. If a situation becomes uncomfortable, please speak with _____.

Part Twenty-Four: Scenario 17 — Honorary or Emeritus Status

Situation

The congregation wants to name the departing pastor “Pastor Emeritus,” “Pastor Emerita,” or give another honorary title.

Boundary Concern

An honorary title can express gratitude, but it may also imply continuing authority, office, access, or pastoral availability.

Before Granting a Title

- ☐ Review denominational policy.
- ☐ Define whether the title is honorary only.
- ☐ Clarify that it grants no supervisory or governing authority.
- ☐ Clarify that it creates no pastoral-care responsibility.
- ☐ Clarify whether the former pastor may preside or preach only by invitation.
- ☐ Consult current or future pastoral leadership when appropriate.
- ☐ Consider whether the title will complicate the transition.
- ☐ Record the terms in writing.

Suggested Clarifying Language

The title _____ is an honorary expression of gratitude. It conveys no continuing pastoral office, authority, supervisory responsibility, or right to perform pastoral acts. Any future participation will occur only through the invitation and authorization of current congregational and denominational leadership.

Honorary status should not be used to avoid the reality of ending.

Part Twenty-Five: Scenario 18 — A Request for an Exception

Situation

A member, family, ministry group, or former pastor believes an exception to the normal boundary is warranted.

Exception Review

An exception should be:

- unusual rather than routine;
- considered by current authorized leadership;
- consistent with denominational policy;
- requested openly rather than arranged privately;
- limited to a specific occasion and role;
- respectful of current pastoral leadership;
- communicated clearly to those involved; and
- unlikely to reestablish the former pastoral relationship.

Exception Request

Person making the request: _____

Requested participation:

Date or occasion: _____

Reason for the request:

Current pastoral leader consulted: ☐ Yes ☐ No

Denominational representative consulted: ☐ Yes ☐ No

Decision: ☐ Approved ☐ Declined ☐ Modified

Approved role and limits:

Person responsible for communicating the decision:

Date: _____

Important Reminder

An exception does not establish a precedent. One authorized participation does not restore pastoral authority or create permission for future involvement.

Part Twenty-Six: When a Boundary Is Crossed

Boundary crossings range from ordinary misunderstandings to serious patterns of interference. The response should be proportionate, clear, and timely.

Level One: Clarification

Appropriate when:

- the boundary was not communicated clearly;
- the contact was isolated;
- no harm or significant interference occurred; and
- the person responds to correction.

Response:

1. Name the specific concern.
2. Restate the boundary.
3. Redirect the need.
4. Confirm the shared understanding.

Level Two: Formal Conversation

Appropriate when:

- a boundary is crossed repeatedly;
- staff or current leadership are being undermined;
- confidential information is being exchanged;
- private influence is developing; or
- earlier clarification was ignored.

Response:

1. Meet with the appropriate leaders present.
2. Describe specific observed behavior.
3. Identify the applicable policy or agreement.
4. State what must stop or change.
5. establish a follow-up date.
6. Document the conversation.
7. Consult denominational leadership.

Level Three: Formal Intervention

Appropriate when:

- the former pastor continues exercising unauthorized pastoral authority;
- confidential information is misused;
- factions are being organized;
- current leaders or staff are being harassed or undermined;
- misconduct may be involved; or
- the behavior presents legal, ethical, or safety concerns.

Possible actions include:

- written direction from the governing body;
- denominational intervention;
- restrictions on access or participation;
- removal from internal communication channels;
- professional disciplinary processes;
- legal or safeguarding consultation; and
- communication to the congregation when necessary and appropriately authorized.

Do not attempt to manage serious misconduct as a simple misunderstanding about friendship.

Part Twenty-Seven: A Boundary-Concern Record

Use this record only when documentation is appropriate. Store it securely.

Date of concern: _____

Person reporting concern: _____

Person or people involved: _____

Specific behavior or request:

Boundary or policy involved:

Immediate pastoral need identified:

Initial response:

Person responsible for follow-up: _____

Denominational consultation needed: ☐ Yes ☐ No

Personnel, safeguarding, legal, or professional consultation needed:

☐ Yes ☐ No

Follow-up date: _____

Outcome:

Avoid recording speculation, labels, or unnecessary confidential details. Document observable behavior, decisions, and actions.

Part Twenty-Eight: Boundary Conversation Planner

Use this page before a significant conversation.

The Situation

What happened?

The Boundary

What expectation, agreement, or policy applies?

The Impact

Who or what is being affected?

The Needed Outcome

What needs to stop, change, or become clear?

The Person Who Should Speak

Opening Sentence

Boundary Statement

Redirection or Alternative

Follow-Up Needed

Date of Conversation

Date for Review

Part Twenty-Nine: Practice Scenarios for Leaders

Use these brief situations in a governing-body, staff, or transition-team meeting.

For each scenario, ask:

1. What pastoral need or relationship is present?
2. What boundary is at risk?
3. Who has authority to respond?
4. What should be said?
5. What follow-up is needed?

Practice Situation A

A longtime member tells the former pastor, “You will always be my pastor,” and asks for regular spiritual direction.

Response:

Practice Situation B

A staff member sends the former pastor confidential minutes from a personnel meeting.

Response:

Practice Situation C

The former pastor posts a social-media comment suggesting that the congregation is abandoning an important ministry.

Response:

Practice Situation D

A family invites the former pastor to conduct a funeral without contacting current leadership.

Response:

Practice Situation E

The former pastor attends every congregational event and is regularly surrounded by members seeking advice.

Response:

Practice Situation F

The new pastor invites the former pastor to participate in a special anniversary service.

Response:

Practice Situation G

A member sees the former pastor in the community and shares news of a personal loss.

Response:

Practice Situation H

The former pastor's spouse remains part of a close congregational friendship group and is repeatedly asked what the former pastor thinks about current decisions.

Response:

Part Thirty: Guidance for the Departing Pastor

Before departure:

- ☐ Learn the denomination's requirements.
- ☐ Discuss expectations with the governing body.
- ☐ Communicate boundaries personally and publicly.

- ☐ Complete or transfer pastoral responsibilities.
- ☐ Decline commitments extending beyond the final date unless formally authorized.
- ☐ Leave internal leadership and communication groups.
- ☐ Transfer digital and administrative access.
- ☐ Tell members whom to contact for care.
- ☐ Clarify expectations with staff.
- ☐ Discuss continuing community and family relationships.

After departure:

- ☐ Do not provide unofficial pastoral care.
- ☐ Do not advise staff or governing-body members privately.
- ☐ Do not seek internal congregational news.
- ☐ Do not comment on transitional or new leadership.
- ☐ Do not intervene in conflict.
- ☐ Do not receive confidential information.
- ☐ Redirect requests promptly.
- ☐ Consult the appropriate leader before accepting any invitation to participate.
- ☐ Honor any requested period of separation.
- ☐ Build a life and support system outside the former congregation.
- ☐ Seek collegial, denominational, therapeutic, or spiritual support when leaving is difficult.

A clear no can be an act of pastoral faithfulness:

Because I care about you and the congregation, I need to honor the ending of my pastoral role.

Part Thirty-One: Guidance for Congregational Leaders

Before departure:

- ☐ Establish a shared boundary agreement.
- ☐ Make pastoral-care alternatives clear.
- ☐ Identify who responds to questions and concerns.

- ☐ Prepare staff for changed supervisory relationships.
- ☐ Address events scheduled after the departure.
- ☐ Include boundary language in final communications and worship.

After departure:

- ☐ Model the boundaries expected of members.
 - ☐ Do not seek private advice from the former pastor.
 - ☐ Respond gently to ordinary misunderstandings.
 - ☐ Address repeated crossings promptly.
 - ☐ Ensure that pastoral needs are actually being met.
 - ☐ Support staff who experience divided loyalties.
 - ☐ Protect confidential information.
 - ☐ Give temporary and future pastors room to lead.
 - ☐ Avoid criticizing the former pastor as a way of enforcing boundaries.
 - ☐ Consult denominational leadership when necessary.
 - ☐ Distinguish discomfort from actual misconduct.
 - ☐ Document significant or repeated concerns appropriately.
-

Part Thirty-Two: Guidance for Staff

- ☐ Know who now supervises your work.
- ☐ Take decisions and concerns to current authorized leaders.
- ☐ Do not send internal reports to the former pastor.
- ☐ Do not ask the former pastor to interpret current leadership.
- ☐ Do not use friendship to continue the former supervisory relationship.
- ☐ Protect personnel, pastoral, and congregational confidentiality.
- ☐ Redirect members seeking the former pastor's services.
- ☐ Report repeated or concerning boundary crossings.
- ☐ Maintain appropriate personal contact only if it can remain free of professional and pastoral expectations.

- ☐ Seek independent support when the transition is personally difficult.

For the broader professional and vocational dimensions of staff transition, see **FM 6.1 — Staff Transition and Handoff Worksheet**.

Part Thirty-Three: Guidance for Members

Members can help the congregation and former pastor leave well.

After the pastoral relationship ends:

- seek pastoral care from current authorized leaders;
- do not ask the former pastor to keep serving privately;
- do not send confidential congregational information;
- do not ask the former pastor to evaluate new leadership;
- do not use the former pastor's name to support a side in a disagreement;
- consult current leaders before inviting the former pastor to a congregational event;
- respect the former pastor's need to build a life beyond the congregation;
- allow new pastoral relationships to develop in their own way; and
- remember that gratitude does not require continued pastoral access.

A member may say:

I am grateful for the ministry we shared. I will honor its ending by seeking pastoral care from those who serve the congregation now.

Part Thirty-Four: Difficult Departures and Serious Harm

Ordinary boundary guidance is not sufficient when a departure involves:

- allegations of abuse;
- sexual misconduct;
- financial misconduct;
- harassment;
- coercion;
- retaliation;
- threats;
- stalking;
- serious breaches of confidentiality;
- professional discipline;
- criminal conduct; or
- risk to children, vulnerable adults, staff, or members.

In these circumstances:

- ☐ Follow safeguarding and reporting requirements.
- ☐ Consult denominational authorities.

- ☐ Obtain legal or professional guidance where appropriate.
- ☐ Protect people who may have experienced harm.
- ☐ Do not imply equal or mutual responsibility when authority, conduct, or harm is unequal.
- ☐ Preserve relevant records.
- ☐ Do not interfere with an investigation, disciplinary process, safeguarding response, or accountability measure.
- ☐ Do not arrange informal mediation when it may be unsafe or inappropriate.
- ☐ Do not require direct contact with the former pastor.
- ☐ Do not treat forgiveness as a substitute for accountability.
- ☐ Do not disclose confidential information publicly.
- ☐ Do not ask the congregation to resolve the matter through a farewell ritual.
- ☐ Restrict access when necessary for safety.
- ☐ Communicate only what is accurate, authorized, and appropriate.

A boundary response in these circumstances may need to be formal and nonnegotiable. The congregation's responsibility is not merely to preserve goodwill. It is also to protect people, tell the truth responsibly, and support appropriate accountability.

Part Thirty-Five: Final Boundary Review

Complete this review before the pastor's departure.

Clarity

- ☐ The formal ending date is known.
- ☐ The departing pastor understands the expectations.
- ☐ Congregational leaders understand the expectations.
- ☐ Staff understand the expectations.
- ☐ Members know whom to contact for pastoral care.

Pastoral Acts

- ☐ Weddings and funerals scheduled after departure have been addressed.
- ☐ Baptisms, confirmations, and other milestones have been addressed.
- ☐ A process exists for considering unusual requests.

☐ No private promises remain unresolved.

Relationships and Communication

☐ Staff relationships have been discussed.

☐ Continuing friendships have been discussed where necessary.

☐ Social-media and digital boundaries have been addressed.

☐ The pastor's family has been considered appropriately.

☐ Community relationships have been discussed.

Authority and Confidentiality

☐ The former pastor will not advise current leaders privately.

☐ Confidential information will remain with authorized leaders.

☐ Internal groups and systems have been updated.

☐ The congregation knows who will respond to boundary concerns.

Future Leadership

☐ The congregation understands that transitional and future pastors need freedom to lead.

☐ The former pastor has released the congregation from preserving a personal legacy.

☐ Members have been asked not to compare every future decision with the former pastor's practice.

☐ Any requested period of separation is clear.

Remaining Concerns

Concern	Action Needed	Responsible Person	Due Date
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Boundary Summary

The pastoral relationship ends on:

Pastoral-care requests should go to:

Requests involving ceremonies should go to:

Staff concerns should go to:

Boundary questions should go to:

Exceptions may be approved by:

Denominational contact:

Any requested period of separation:

Review date, if needed:

A Final Word

The end of a pastoral relationship changes the meaning of contact. A once-pastoral conversation may need redirection; a once-appropriate request may now belong to someone else. Friendship may need time and distance before its new form becomes clear.

These changes feel like loss because they are loss. Clear boundaries do not deny the ministry that was shared; they honor its conclusion.

The departing pastor is freed from continuing responsibility. Staff are freed from divided supervision, members are directed toward the care available now, and new leaders receive room to serve.

Boundaries make the goodbye real and give pastor and congregation freedom to go forward in peace.

FM 9.1 — Farewell Celebration Planner

Purpose of This Resource

A farewell celebration gathers the congregation to express gratitude, acknowledge the end of a shared ministry, and say goodbye to the departing pastor and family.

The celebration should honor the ministry without pretending that everyone experienced it in the same way. It should be warm but not excessive, truthful but not a public evaluation, and personal without becoming intrusive.

This resource helps a team plan a reception, meal, open house, community gathering, or similar event. For the final worship service and formal release, use FM 9.2 — Final Worship: Thanksgiving, Release, and Blessing.

Guiding Principles

A healthy farewell celebration:

- gives people a genuine opportunity to say goodbye;
- expresses gratitude for the ministry that has been shared;
- recognizes the pastor as a whole person rather than only as a religious professional;
- includes the pastor's spouse, partner, or family appropriately and with their consent;
- makes room for children, youth, staff, community partners, and people whose participation may otherwise be overlooked;
- reflects the congregation's actual culture and resources;
- avoids exaggerated praise or forced emotional display;
- respects privacy and personal boundaries;
- does not become a congregational business meeting or pastoral evaluation;
- does not burden the departing pastor with planning the event;
- avoids promises about continued involvement after departure; and
- supports a clear and gracious ending.

The aim is simpler: help people mark the ending with honesty and care.

Part One: Celebration Information

Congregation: _____

Departing pastor: _____

Pastor's final day of service: _____

Celebration date: _____

Starting time: _____

Ending time: _____

Location: _____

Type of gathering:

- ☐ Reception
- ☐ Congregational meal
- ☐ Open house
- ☐ Community gathering
- ☐ Picnic or informal gathering
- ☐ Program followed by refreshments
- ☐ Other: _____

Expected attendance: _____**Planning-team coordinator:** _____**Governing-body liaison:** _____**Staff liaison:** _____**Contact information for questions:**

Part Two: Clarify the Purpose and Tone

Before choosing food, decorations, speakers, or activities, agree on the purpose of the gathering.

Our Purpose

Complete this sentence:

This celebration will give our congregation an opportunity to

What We Want the Gathering to Communicate

Choose three to five words:

- ☐ Grateful
- ☐ Warm
- ☐ Hopeful

- ☐ Honest
- ☐ Joyful
- ☐ Reflective
- ☐ Informal
- ☐ Intergenerational
- ☐ Hospitable
- ☐ Community-centered
- ☐ Prayerful
- ☐ Other: _____

What This Event Will Not Be

- ☐ A surprise event held without consulting the pastor
- ☐ A public performance review
- ☐ A forum for resolving grievances
- ☐ A place for disclosing confidential matters
- ☐ A fundraiser for the congregation
- ☐ A platform for making promises about the pastor's future involvement
- ☐ A substitute for the congregation's formal action ending the pastoral relationship
- ☐ A substitute for the final worship service or formal liturgy of release
- ☐ An event so elaborate that it creates financial or emotional discomfort
- ☐ A gathering that requires every participant to express the same feelings

Planning-Team Agreement

The celebration's purpose and tone have been reviewed by:

Name	Role	Date

Part Three: Consult the Departing Pastor and Family

A farewell celebration is offered for the pastor, but it should not be planned without the pastor. The planning team should learn what would feel meaningful, appropriate, and manageable.

The pastor should be consulted without being made responsible for the event.

Questions for the Pastor

1. What kind of gathering would feel most natural to you?

2. Are there parts of a farewell event that would make you uncomfortable?

3. Would you prefer a formal program, a brief program, or an informal gathering?

4. How would you like your spouse, partner, or family to be included?

5. Are there family members or significant guests who should be invited directly?

6. Are there community partners, denominational colleagues, former staff members, or others who should be included?

7. Are there dietary, accessibility, scheduling, or health considerations we should know?

8. Would you like an opportunity to speak? If so, for approximately how long?

9. Are you comfortable receiving gifts publicly?

10. Are photographs or video recordings acceptable?

11. May written notes, photographs, or stories be collected into a keepsake?

12. Is there anything else that would help this celebration feel gracious and manageable?

Agreements with the Pastor

Matter	Agreement
Type of gathering	
Length of program	
Pastor's participation	
Family participation	
Public gifts	
Photographs or recording	
Invited guests	
Topics or activities to avoid	
Accessibility or dietary needs	
Other	

Part Four: Form the Planning Team

The departing pastor should not be expected to manage the farewell celebration. Establish a small team with clear responsibilities.

Planning Roles

Responsibility	Person Assigned	Due Date
Overall coordination		
Governing-body liaison		
Pastor and family liaison		
Invitations and publicity		
Program planning		
Speaker coordination		
Food and refreshments		
Facility preparation		
Decorations and displays		
Gift or congregational offering		
Written notes or keepsake		
Children and youth participation		
Staff participation		
Community and denominational guests		

Responsibility	Person Assigned	Due Date
Accessibility		
Photography or recording		
Technology and sound		
Welcome and hospitality		
Cleanup		
Expense tracking		
Follow-up and thank-you notes		

Team Practices

- ☐ One person has final responsibility for coordinating decisions.
 - ☐ The planning team knows what decisions require governing-body approval.
 - ☐ The pastor has one designated liaison rather than receiving questions from many planners.
 - ☐ Staff members are not carrying the entire event unless that responsibility belongs appropriately to their positions.
 - ☐ Volunteers have clear and manageable assignments.
 - ☐ A schedule for planning meetings has been established.
-

Part Five: Identify the People to Include

A pastor's ministry extends beyond the most visible congregational leaders. A farewell gathering should consider the breadth of relationships formed during the ministry.

Congregational Participants

- ☐ Current members
- ☐ Regular attendees
- ☐ Homebound members
- ☐ Children
- ☐ Youth
- ☐ Young adults
- ☐ Older adults
- ☐ Newer participants

- ☐ Former members, when appropriate
- ☐ Ministry leaders
- ☐ Volunteers
- ☐ Current staff
- ☐ Former staff members, when appropriate

Wider Community

- ☐ Denominational or judicatory representatives
- ☐ Neighboring clergy
- ☐ Ecumenical or interfaith partners
- ☐ Community organizations
- ☐ School or nonprofit partners
- ☐ Local officials
- ☐ Chaplains or care-facility partners
- ☐ Musicians or artists connected with the congregation
- ☐ Others: _____

Personal Guests

- ☐ Pastor's family members
- ☐ Close friends identified by the pastor
- ☐ Mentors or colleagues
- ☐ Others requested by the pastor

Participation Beyond Attendance

Some people may be unable to attend but still want to participate.

Consider providing:

- ☐ A way to submit a written note
- ☐ A way to send a photograph
- ☐ A recorded greeting, with the pastor's consent
- ☐ Transportation for people who need it

- ☐ A livestream or remote option, if appropriate
 - ☐ Delivery of a program or keepsake to homebound members
 - ☐ A simple activity for children or youth to complete in advance
-

Part Six: Plan Invitations and Publicity

The invitation should tell people what the event is, when and where it will occur, whether a response is needed, and how they may participate.

Invitation Information

- ☐ Name and purpose of the event
- ☐ Pastor's name
- ☐ Date
- ☐ Starting and ending times
- ☐ Location
- ☐ Accessibility information
- ☐ Meal or refreshment information
- ☐ Response deadline, if needed
- ☐ Instructions for contributing notes, photographs, or gifts
- ☐ Contact information for questions
- ☐ Childcare information, if applicable
- ☐ Remote-participation information, if applicable

Communication Channels

- ☐ Worship announcements
- ☐ Printed bulletin
- ☐ Congregational email
- ☐ Newsletter
- ☐ Website
- ☐ Social media

- ☐ Postal mail
- ☐ Telephone calls
- ☐ Direct invitations to community partners
- ☐ Direct invitations to homebound members
- ☐ Direct invitations to the pastor's guests

Invitation Timeline

Communication	Audience	Date Sent	Person Responsible
Save-the-date			
Full invitation			
Reminder			
Special guest invitation			
Final details			

Sample Invitation

Please join us as we give thanks for the ministry we have shared with the Reverend _____ and say goodbye as this pastoral relationship comes to an end.

The farewell celebration will be held on _____ at _____ in _____.

The gathering will include _____.

Please respond by _____ to _____.

Those who cannot attend may participate by _____.

We hope you will join us for this time of gratitude, remembrance, and farewell.

Adapt the language to the circumstances of the departure and the congregation's customary way of speaking.

Part Seven: Design the Gathering

The celebration should be long enough to allow meaningful participation but not so long that the pastor, family, or congregation becomes overwhelmed.

Recommended Shape

A farewell celebration might include:

1. Welcome
2. Brief explanation of the gathering's purpose
3. Meal or refreshments
4. Selected expressions of gratitude

5. Participation by children, youth, staff, or community partners
6. Presentation of a gift or keepsake
7. Brief words from the departing pastor
8. Closing words or a simple prayer
9. Informal time for personal goodbyes

This is a planning structure, not a required order.

Event Schedule

Time	Activity	Leader	Requirements
	Guests arrive		
	Welcome		
	Meal or refreshments		
	Program begins		
	Expressions of gratitude		
	Presentation		
	Pastor's response		
	Closing		
	Personal goodbyes		
	Cleanup		

Planned length of formal program: _____

Planned ending time: _____

Protecting the Length

- ☐ The program has a designated host.
- ☐ Each speaker has been given a time limit.
- ☐ The number of speakers is manageable.
- ☐ Musical or video presentations have been timed in advance.
- ☐ The pastor knows when they will be invited to speak.
- ☐ The gathering has a clear ending.
- ☐ Someone is prepared to shorten the program if necessary.

Part Eight: Select Speakers and Contributions

Open-ended invitations to “say anything” can produce a program that is too long, repetitive, embarrassing, or unexpectedly painful. Select speakers thoughtfully and give them clear guidance.

Possible Voices

- ☐ Governing-body representative
- ☐ Staff member
- ☐ Children’s or youth representative
- ☐ Longtime member
- ☐ Newer member
- ☐ Community partner
- ☐ Denominational representative
- ☐ Ministry colleague
- ☐ Pastor’s family member, only if desired
- ☐ Other: _____

No single speaker should be expected to represent the feelings of the entire congregation.

Speaker Guidance

Provide each speaker with:

- the purpose of the gathering;
- the expected length of the contribution;
- the desired tone;
- the specific part of the ministry they are invited to address;
- a reminder not to disclose confidential information;
- a reminder not to use the occasion to raise grievances;
- a request to avoid private jokes that exclude most listeners;
- a request not to make promises about the pastor’s continued involvement; and
- the name of the person who can answer questions.

Speaker Planner

Speaker	Perspective or Topic	Time Limit	Confirmed
			☐
			☐
			☐
			☐
			☐

Open-Microphone Decision

Will an open microphone be offered?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, with a host and clear time limit
- ☐ Instead of an open microphone, guests will be invited to write notes

If an open microphone is used:

- ☐ The pastor is comfortable with it.
- ☐ A host will invite and conclude contributions.
- ☐ Speakers will be asked to limit themselves to _____ minutes.
- ☐ The host may intervene if a contribution becomes inappropriate or excessively long.
- ☐ The open-microphone period will end after _____ minutes.

A written-note station is often more inclusive and easier to manage than an unrestricted open microphone.

Part Nine: Make Room for Honest Gratitude

Gratitude does not require the congregation to claim that the ministry was perfect. Nor does it require every person to participate in the same way.

A farewell celebration should not become the place where disappointments are publicly settled. It also should not demand exaggerated praise from people whose experiences were complicated.

Planning for Varied Experiences

- ☐ Participation is invited rather than required.
- ☐ Speakers will describe specific gifts, moments, or contributions instead of making sweeping claims.
- ☐ The event will not declare that everyone experienced the ministry in the same way.
- ☐ People who prefer not to attend will not be judged.
- ☐ The pastor will not be surprised by a public apology, confrontation, or disclosure.
- ☐ Unresolved conflicts will not be staged as part of the celebration.
- ☐ The program will avoid language suggesting that difficult experiences did not occur.
- ☐ The celebration will remain focused on gratitude and farewell rather than evaluation.

A helpful sentence for the host may be:

Today we give thanks for the ministry we have shared and for the particular ways this pastor's service has shaped our life together.

This language expresses gratitude without requiring an unrealistic account of the entire ministry.

Part Ten: Include Staff Well

Staff members often experience a pastor's departure both personally and professionally. Their participation should be invited with care.

Staff Considerations

- ☐ Staff members have been invited to participate but are not required to speak.
- ☐ Staff are not expected to plan and carry the entire celebration as an extension of their normal work.
- ☐ Staff members know whether their participation is part of paid work or volunteer service.
- ☐ No staff member is being asked to disclose private supervisory or personnel matters.
- ☐ The program does not present staff as responsible for preserving the departing pastor's legacy.
- ☐ Continuing staff members are not overlooked while attention is focused on the departing pastor.
- ☐ Staff have a private opportunity to say goodbye if desired.
- ☐ Staff members' varied experiences of the transition are respected.

Staff Participation

Staff Member or Group	Desired Form of Participation	Support Needed
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For broader staff-transition planning, see FM 6.1 — Staff Transition and Handoff Worksheet

Part Eleven: Include Children and Youth

Children and youth may experience the pastor's departure deeply, especially if the pastor participated in baptisms, confirmation, camps, mission trips, school events, or other significant moments.

Their participation should be meaningful and age-appropriate rather than decorative.

Possible Forms of Participation

- ☐ Create cards or artwork
- ☐ Write brief memories or blessings
- ☐ Prepare a photograph display

- ☐ Offer a short musical contribution
- ☐ Present a group gift
- ☐ Help welcome guests
- ☐ Assist with refreshments
- ☐ Record short messages
- ☐ Participate in a brief spoken presentation
- ☐ Other: _____

Safeguards

- ☐ Participation is voluntary.
 - ☐ Parents or guardians have received needed information.
 - ☐ Appropriate supervision is provided.
 - ☐ Photograph and recording permissions have been obtained.
 - ☐ Children and youth know what is expected.
 - ☐ Contributions have been reviewed for length and suitability.
 - ☐ No child or young person is pressured to display emotion publicly.
-

Part Twelve: Plan Food and Hospitality

Food can support fellowship, but it should not become the measure of the celebration's success.

Hospitality Plan

Meal or refreshments to be provided:

Estimated number of guests: _____

Food coordinator: _____

Serving coordinator: _____

Cleanup coordinator: _____

Food and Hospitality Checklist

- ☐ The menu fits the time, location, and budget.
- ☐ Dietary needs have been considered.
- ☐ Allergen information will be available where appropriate.
- ☐ Safe food-handling practices will be followed.
- ☐ Serving tables and traffic patterns are accessible.
- ☐ Seating is available for those who need it.
- ☐ Water and nonalcoholic beverages are available.
- ☐ The pastor and family will not be required to serve or manage food.
- ☐ Food is available for volunteers working before or after the event.
- ☐ Leftover food and supplies have a planned destination.

Hospitality Supplies

- ☐ Tables
 - ☐ Chairs
 - ☐ Table coverings
 - ☐ Plates and bowls
 - ☐ Cups
 - ☐ Utensils
 - ☐ Napkins
 - ☐ Serving utensils
 - ☐ Beverage supplies
 - ☐ Waste and recycling containers
 - ☐ Food labels
 - ☐ Take-home containers
 - ☐ Cleaning supplies
 - ☐ Other: _____
-

Part Thirteen: Prepare the Space

The physical setting should help people gather, move, listen, and say goodbye without unnecessary congestion.

Space Checklist

- ☐ The room has been reserved.
- ☐ Capacity is sufficient.
- ☐ Entrances and restrooms are accessible.
- ☐ Seating accommodates varied mobility needs.
- ☐ The pastor and family have a comfortable place to sit.
- ☐ A private room is available if the pastor or a family member needs a break.
- ☐ The program area is visible.
- ☐ Sound amplification is available if needed.
- ☐ Lighting is adequate.
- ☐ Temperature control has been considered.
- ☐ Signs direct guests to the gathering.
- ☐ A welcome table is staffed.
- ☐ A place is available for cards and written notes.
- ☐ Gifts and monetary contributions can be secured.
- ☐ Displays do not block exits or accessible routes.
- ☐ Cleanup responsibilities are assigned.

Room Areas

Area	Location	Person Responsible
Welcome and registration		
Food and beverages		
Program seating		
Cards and written notes		
Memory display		
Gifts		
Children's activity		

Area	Location	Person Responsible
Quiet or private space		
Other		

Part Fourteen: Use Photographs, Stories, and Displays Carefully

Photographs and stories can help the congregation remember the ministry it has shared. They should be selected with attention to privacy, balance, and permission.

Possible Displays

- ☐ Photographs from across the ministry
- ☐ A timeline of significant congregational moments
- ☐ Children's artwork
- ☐ Written gratitude cards
- ☐ A map or list of community partnerships
- ☐ Symbols of ministries shared
- ☐ A digital slideshow
- ☐ A memory book
- ☐ Other: _____

Display Checklist

- ☐ Materials represent more than one season or ministry area.
- ☐ The display includes a range of ages and participants.
- ☐ Photographs are appropriate for public viewing.
- ☐ Necessary permissions have been obtained.
- ☐ Confidential pastoral moments are not included.
- ☐ Images of children and youth are used according to congregational policy.
- ☐ Captions are accurate.
- ☐ The pastor has approved any especially personal material.
- ☐ Original or irreplaceable items are protected.
- ☐ A plan exists for returning borrowed items.

☐ The display will not be treated as the congregation's official history or transition assessment.

For gathering gratitude and stories, see FM 2.1 — Gratitude, Stories, and Honest Remembering Guide

Part Fifteen: Plan Gifts and Financial Expressions

A congregational gift may be a meaningful expression of gratitude. It should be appropriate to the congregation's resources, handled transparently, and consistent with financial and tax requirements.

Gift Decision

Will the congregation present a gift?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, a purchased gift
- ☐ Yes, a monetary gift
- ☐ Yes, a congregational offering
- ☐ Yes, a handmade or commemorative gift
- ☐ Yes, a collection of letters, notes, or photographs
- ☐ Other: _____

Gift Planning

Gift coordinator: _____

Approved budget: _____

Source of funds: _____

Date contributions close: _____

Person responsible for financial handling: _____

Person making the presentation: _____

Gift Checklist

- ☐ The pastor has indicated whether public gift-giving is comfortable.
- ☐ The governing body has approved the gift where required.
- ☐ Congregational funds and voluntary contributions are clearly distinguished.
- ☐ Participation in a special offering is voluntary.

- ☐ Contribution amounts will remain private.
- ☐ Funds will be received, recorded, and disbursed through appropriate channels.
- ☐ Tax or compensation questions have been reviewed with a qualified person.
- ☐ The presentation will not announce the names or amounts of individual contributors.
- ☐ The gift does not create an expectation of future pastoral availability.
- ☐ The gift can be transported or delivered conveniently.
- ☐ A record of the congregation's action will be retained if appropriate.

Suggested Invitation to Contribute

Members and friends who wish to participate in a congregational expression of gratitude may do so by _____ before _____. Participation is entirely voluntary. All gifts will be handled through the congregation's established financial procedures.

Part Sixteen: Collect Letters and Notes

Written expressions of gratitude allow more people to participate and give the pastor something that can be received after the intensity of the public celebration has passed.

Collection Plan

- ☐ Cards will be collected before the event.
- ☐ A writing station will be available during the event.
- ☐ Instructions will be provided for those unable to attend.
- ☐ Children and youth will be invited to participate.
- ☐ Notes will be placed in a box, album, binder, or keepsake.
- ☐ The pastor has consented to the selected format.
- ☐ Private notes will remain sealed.
- ☐ Contributors will be told if their notes may be displayed or reproduced.
- ☐ A deadline and collection location have been communicated.

Simple Writing Prompts

Participants may be invited to complete one of these sentences:

- I give thanks for...
- One moment I remember is...

- Your ministry helped our congregation...
- A gift you shared with us was...
- One thing I hope you carry with you is...
- My prayer for you is...

For fuller sample letters and notes, see FM 2.2 – Mutual Gratitude Letters and Notes

Part Seventeen: Plan Photography and Recording

Photographs can preserve the occasion, but constant recording may interfere with genuine conversation and goodbye.

Photography Decisions

Photographer: _____

Will the formal program be recorded? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Will the event be livestreamed? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Who will receive the final files?

Photography and Recording Checklist

- ☐ The pastor and family have consented.
 - ☐ Guests will be informed if recording occurs.
 - ☐ Congregational policies regarding children and youth will be followed.
 - ☐ People may decline to be photographed.
 - ☐ A limited number of photographs has been planned so the event is not dominated by photography.
 - ☐ Any slideshow or video has been tested.
 - ☐ Music, photographs, and recordings are used appropriately.
 - ☐ Private conversations will not be recorded.
 - ☐ Files will be stored securely.
 - ☐ The pastor will receive copies as agreed.
 - ☐ Public posting has been discussed separately from permission to take photographs.
-

Part Eighteen: Anticipate Emotion and Provide Care

Farewell celebrations can bring joy, grief, relief, affection, awkwardness, and fatigue. The planning team should expect emotion without trying to manage or manufacture it.

Care Checklist

- ☐ The host understands that varied emotions are normal.
- ☐ Tissues and water are available.
- ☐ A quiet space is available.
- ☐ The pastor and family may step away when needed.
- ☐ No one is required to speak publicly.
- ☐ Children and youth have supportive adults nearby.
- ☐ A person is available to assist anyone who becomes distressed.
- ☐ Difficult conversations will be redirected away from the public gathering.
- ☐ The program allows warmth without pressuring the pastor to respond to every tribute.
- ☐ The pastor's response may be brief.

Responding to an Inappropriate Conversation

If someone attempts to use the celebration to raise a grievance, disclose confidential information, or reopen a conflict, a host or leader may say:

This gathering is for gratitude and farewell. This is not the appropriate setting for that conversation. Let us help you identify another way to address your concern.

If someone seeks a promise of continued pastoral involvement, a leader may say:

Today we are honoring the ministry that has been shared and marking its conclusion. Future pastoral care and leadership will now belong to those serving the congregation after the pastor's departure.

Part Nineteen: Prepare the Host

The host provides gentle structure and protects the purpose of the gathering.

Host Responsibilities

- ☐ Welcome participants.
- ☐ State the purpose of the event.
- ☐ Recognize special guests.
- ☐ Explain the schedule.

- ☐ Introduce speakers.
- ☐ Keep the program within its planned length.
- ☐ Redirect inappropriate or overly long contributions.
- ☐ Introduce the presentation of gifts or keepsakes.
- ☐ Invite the pastor to respond.
- ☐ Explain how personal goodbyes will occur.
- ☐ Close the formal program clearly.

Sample Welcome

Welcome. We have gathered to give thanks for the ministry we have shared with the Reverend _____, to honor the relationships formed during this season of our congregation's life, and to say goodbye as this pastoral relationship comes to an end.

We know that endings bring many emotions. Today we make room especially for gratitude, remembrance, and farewell. Thank you for being part of this gathering.

Sample Introduction to Congregational Tributes

No single story can describe an entire ministry, and no one person can speak for every experience. The voices we will hear offer particular memories and expressions of gratitude from different parts of our shared life.

Sample Introduction to the Pastor's Response

We have had an opportunity to offer some of our gratitude. Reverend _____, if you wish, we now invite you to share a few words with us.

Sample Closing

Thank you to everyone who helped prepare this gathering and to all who have participated. There will now be time for personal greetings and goodbyes. Please be mindful that many people may wish to speak with the pastor and family.

May we receive this time for what it is: an opportunity to give thanks, to honor what has been shared, and to say goodbye with grace.

Part Twenty: Organize Personal Goodbyes

Many people will value a brief personal moment with the pastor. Without a plan, however, the pastor may become exhausted or a few conversations may consume all the available time.

Personal-Goodbye Plan

- ☐ Informal conversation throughout the event
- ☐ A receiving line

- ☐ Table-by-table greetings
- ☐ Scheduled small-group moments
- ☐ A card or note station instead of individual conversations
- ☐ A combination of these approaches

Goodbye Considerations

- ☐ The pastor has agreed to the plan.
- ☐ The pastor has a chair if needed.
- ☐ A team member will monitor the length of the line.
- ☐ Guests will be encouraged to keep conversations brief.
- ☐ A team member can help conclude lengthy conversations.
- ☐ The pastor may take breaks.
- ☐ The planned ending time will be honored.
- ☐ Transportation and departure arrangements are clear.

Suggested Announcement

Many people would like a personal opportunity to say goodbye. Please keep your conversation brief so that others may also have time with the pastor and family. Written notes may be placed _____.

Part Twenty-One: Budget and Expenses

A meaningful celebration does not require an elaborate budget.

Budget Worksheet

Item	Estimated Cost	Approved Amount	Actual Cost
Invitations and printing			
Food and beverages			
Facility expenses			
Decorations			
Gift or keepsake			
Photography or recording			
Childcare			
Accessibility needs			

Item	Estimated Cost	Approved Amount	Actual Cost
Supplies			
Cleanup			
Other			
Total			

Financial Review

- ☐ The governing body has approved the budget.
 - ☐ A person is responsible for tracking expenses.
 - ☐ Purchases follow congregational financial policies.
 - ☐ Reimbursement procedures are clear.
 - ☐ Donated goods and services are documented where appropriate.
 - ☐ Special contributions are handled through established financial procedures.
 - ☐ The congregation is not incurring an obligation it cannot responsibly meet.
-

Part Twenty-Two: Final Week Checklist

Complete during the week before the celebration.

Participants

- ☐ Pastor and family have received the final schedule.
- ☐ Speakers are confirmed.
- ☐ Special guests are confirmed.
- ☐ Volunteers know their assignments.
- ☐ Staff members understand their roles.
- ☐ Children and youth participants are prepared.

Program

- ☐ The program order is final.
- ☐ Names and titles are accurate.
- ☐ Speaker time limits have been communicated.

- ☐ The host has the final script or outline.
- ☐ The pastor's speaking opportunity is confirmed.
- ☐ Gift presentations are coordinated.
- ☐ The closing is prepared.

Facility and Hospitality

- ☐ Room setup is confirmed.
- ☐ Food quantities are confirmed.
- ☐ Dietary accommodations are prepared.
- ☐ Accessibility needs have been addressed.
- ☐ Sound and projection equipment have been tested.
- ☐ Signs are prepared.
- ☐ Welcome, card, display, and gift areas are prepared.
- ☐ Cleanup supplies are available.

Communication and Safety

- ☐ Final reminders have been sent.
- ☐ Emergency exits remain clear.
- ☐ Emergency contacts are available.
- ☐ Photograph and recording plans are confirmed.
- ☐ Money and gifts can be secured.
- ☐ A private or quiet room is available.
- ☐ A weather or emergency contingency plan exists.

Boundaries and Care

- ☐ The host knows how to redirect inappropriate contributions.
- ☐ The pastor will not be asked to make decisions about congregational business.
- ☐ No surprise speaker, presentation, or disclosure has been added.
- ☐ The gathering will not imply an ongoing pastoral role.
- ☐ Someone will monitor the pastor's comfort and energy.

For boundary planning beyond the farewell event itself, see FM 8.1 — Boundary Conversation Guide and Scenarios.

Part Twenty-Three: Day-of-Event Checklist

Before Guests Arrive

- ☐ Unlock and inspect the facility.
- ☐ Confirm room arrangement.
- ☐ Check accessible entrances and restrooms.
- ☐ Test microphones, projection, and sound.
- ☐ Set up food and beverage areas.
- ☐ Set up welcome and information tables.
- ☐ Set up the card and note station.
- ☐ Secure gifts and financial contributions.
- ☐ Prepare reserved seating.
- ☐ Brief the host, speakers, and volunteers.
- ☐ Review the event schedule.
- ☐ Confirm who will respond to emergencies.
- ☐ Welcome the pastor and family privately.

During the Event

- ☐ Welcome guests.
- ☐ Assist people with accessibility needs.
- ☐ Keep food and hospitality areas supplied.
- ☐ Protect the program's timing.
- ☐ Monitor sound and technology.
- ☐ Support children and youth participants.
- ☐ Respect photograph and recording preferences.
- ☐ Watch for anyone who needs assistance.
- ☐ Redirect inappropriate conversations.

- ☐ Give the pastor and family space or breaks when needed.
- ☐ Secure cards, gifts, and contributions.

At the Conclusion

- ☐ Announce how personal goodbyes will occur.
 - ☐ Help manage the flow of guests.
 - ☐ Honor the announced ending time.
 - ☐ Assist the pastor and family with gifts and personal belongings.
 - ☐ Confirm transportation or departure arrangements.
 - ☐ Secure financial contributions.
 - ☐ Return the facility to its proper condition.
 - ☐ Save programs, photographs, and other items designated for the congregational record.
-

Part Twenty-Four: Follow-Up Checklist

The celebration is not complete when the final guest leaves.

- ☐ Cards, notes, photographs, and gifts have been delivered to the pastor.
 - ☐ Monetary gifts or offerings have been processed appropriately.
 - ☐ Borrowed items have been returned.
 - ☐ Volunteers and contributors have been thanked.
 - ☐ Expenses and reimbursements have been completed.
 - ☐ Photographs or recordings have been provided as agreed.
 - ☐ Public photographs have been posted only with appropriate permission.
 - ☐ The final program and selected materials have been placed in congregational records.
 - ☐ Private or confidential materials have not been archived publicly.
 - ☐ The planning team has reviewed any unresolved matters.
 - ☐ The departing pastor is not being asked to continue answering routine follow-up questions.
 - ☐ The congregation's published information reflects the conclusion of the pastoral relationship.
-

Part Twenty-Five: Planning-Team Review

Complete after the celebration.

Review date: _____

Participants:

What Helped the Gathering Fulfill Its Purpose?

Were People Given Meaningful Ways to Participate?

Were the Pastor and Family Treated with Care?

Were Staff and Volunteers Supported Appropriately?

Were Any Boundaries Unclear or Difficult to Maintain?

Is Any Follow-Up Still Needed?

Follow-Up Item	Person Responsible	Due Date
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Farewell Celebration Summary

Date and type of gathering:

Planning-team coordinator:

Estimated attendance: _____

Gift or keepsake presented:

Materials retained for congregational records:

Remaining follow-up:

Date all responsibilities were completed: _____

=====

A Final Word

No farewell celebration can contain the whole meaning of a pastoral relationship. Years of worship, care, leadership, conflict, growth, and ordinary shared life exceed any meal, program, or collection of stories.

The gathering still has a particular gift:

people can be present to one another, make gratitude visible, honor the pastor and family without asking them to remain, and say together what needs to be said: thank you, God be with you, and goodbye.

When the celebration is complete, let it be complete. Carry the gratitude forward, honor the boundaries, and let pastor and congregation take their separate next steps.

FM 9.2 — Final Worship: Thanksgiving, Release, and Blessing

Purpose of This Resource

In the final worship service, the congregation marks the end of a pastoral relationship within its worship of God.

It gives the congregation and departing pastor an opportunity to:

- give thanks for the ministry they have shared;
- acknowledge that the pastoral relationship is ending;
- confess the incompleteness present in every ministry;
- release one another from pastoral responsibilities and expectations;
- pray for those who are leaving and those who remain;
- entrust the future to God; and
- offer and receive a final blessing.

This resource includes a planning guide and an adaptable order of worship. It should be used in accordance with the congregation's theology, denominational polity, and customary worship practices.

A farewell reception or celebration may surround the final service, but it should not replace the worshiping community's formal act of thanksgiving and release. For planning the social gathering, see FM 9.1 — Farewell Celebration Planner

The Character of the Service

The final service should be recognizably worship.

It is not primarily:

- a retirement ceremony;
- a testimonial program;
- a congregational meeting;
- a performance review;
- a defense of the ministry;
- an opportunity to resolve every conflict;
- a celebration centered entirely on the pastor;
- a preview of the congregation's next pastor; or
- a promise that the pastoral relationship will continue informally.

The service may include personal elements, but its central movement is toward God:

thanksgiving, truth, release, blessing, and sending.

The pastor and congregation come before God with gratitude for what has been shared, humility about what remains incomplete, and trust that God will accompany them as they go separate ways.

Part One: Service Information

Congregation: _____

Departing pastor: _____

Date of final worship service: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

Pastor's final day of service: _____

Date the pastoral relationship formally ends: _____

Worship-planning coordinator: _____

Governing-body representative: _____

Denominational or judicatory representative, if participating:

Preacher: _____

Presider: _____

Person leading the act of release:

Part Two: Consult Denominational Requirements

Some denominations prescribe a service for the dissolution or conclusion of a pastoral relationship. Others require participation by a judicatory representative or action by a governing body.

Before preparing the service:

- ☐ Consult denominational policy.
- ☐ Determine whether an approved liturgy must be used.
- ☐ Confirm who has authority to lead the act of release.
- ☐ Confirm whether the congregation must take formal action before the final service.
- ☐ Confirm whether a denominational representative should participate.
- ☐ Clarify the date on which the pastoral relationship officially ends.
- ☐ Determine how pastoral records, authority, and responsibilities are transferred.
- ☐ Confirm whether the pastor may preside at sacraments or ordinances during the final service.

- ☐ Review expectations concerning the pastor's relationship with the congregation after departure.
- ☐ Adapt this resource where required by polity or theology.

Requirements that must be included:

Language that must be approved:

Part Three: Plan the Service Together

The departing pastor should participate in planning the service, but the service should not be shaped solely by the pastor. Representatives of the congregation should also participate.

Planning Participants

- ☐ Departing pastor
- ☐ Worship-planning staff or team
- ☐ Governing-body representative
- ☐ Denominational representative
- ☐ Music leader
- ☐ Staff representative
- ☐ Children's or youth representative
- ☐ Other: _____

Planning Questions

1. What needs to be named clearly in this service?

2. What particular gifts of the shared ministry should be acknowledged?

3. What language of thanksgiving fits the actual experience of this congregation?

4. How will the service acknowledge that every ministry includes unfinished work?

5. Who should lead the formal act of release?

6. What post-departure boundaries should be named in worship?

Use the formal release appropriate to this service. For broader boundary conversations and scenarios, see FM 8.1 — Boundary Conversation Guide and Scenarios.

7. How will the pastor bless the congregation?

8. How will the congregation bless the pastor and family?

9. What emotional or pastoral concerns require special care?

10. What denominational requirements govern the service?

Part Four: Plan the Fivefold Movement of the Service

The final service may follow the congregation's customary order of worship. The act of thanksgiving and release can be placed where it fits naturally.

Required Movement

Gathering

The congregation gathers to worship God. The welcome may name the pastor's final service briefly, without centering the pastor before worship has begun.

Confession

Near the beginning of worship, pastor and congregation come honestly before God and receive an assurance or declaration of grace. Confession must not imply equal responsibility where serious harm, abuse, discipline, or misconduct is present.

Proclaiming the Word

Scripture and sermon proclaim the Good News. Where Communion, Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, or another sacramental practice is celebrated, place it here as part of the congregation's proclamation of God's grace, according to its tradition.

Response and Thanksgiving

The congregation responds to the Good News through faith, prayer, offering, thanksgiving, and the formal act of release. The release ends pastoral authority and expectations while honoring enduring Christian affection.

Blessing

Pastor, family, and congregation receive and offer blessing, but the final movement belongs to God's blessing and sending. The service ends quietly and clearly at the dismissal.

Blessing

The congregation blesses the departing pastor and family. The pastor blesses those who remain.

Part Five: Select Scripture

Choose scripture that directs attention toward God's faithfulness, the shared ministry of the church, the reality of change, and the call to continue in faith.

Possible Old Testament Readings

- Genesis 12:1–9 — Abram called to go
- Genesis 31:44–55 — Jacob and Laban part in covenant
- Exodus 13:17–22 — God leads the people on their journey
- Deuteronomy 31:1–8 — Be strong and courageous
- Joshua 1:1–9 — God's presence in a change of leadership
- 1 Samuel 7:12 — Thus far the Lord has helped us
- Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 — A season for every purpose
- Isaiah 40:28–31 — Those who wait for the Lord
- Isaiah 43:1–3, 18–19 — God makes a new way
- Isaiah 55:10–13 — God's word accomplishes its purpose
- Jeremiah 29:4–7 — Seek the welfare of the place
- Micah 6:6–8 — What the Lord requires

Possible Psalms

- Psalm 23 — The Lord is my shepherd
- Psalm 46 — God is our refuge and strength
- Psalm 90 — God has been our dwelling place
- Psalm 100 — Enter God's gates with thanksgiving
- Psalm 103 — Bless the Lord, O my soul
- Psalm 121 — The Lord will keep your going out and coming in
- Psalm 126 — The Lord has done great things for us
- Psalm 133 — How good it is when God's people dwell in unity

Possible Gospel Readings

- Matthew 5:13–16 — Salt and light
- Matthew 11:28–30 — Come to me and rest
- Matthew 28:16–20 — Christ's continuing presence
- Mark 4:26–32 — Seeds growing beyond our sight
- Luke 10:1–9 — Sent into ministry
- Luke 24:13–35 — Christ present on the road

- John 10:11–16 — The good shepherd
- John 13:1–17, 34–35 — Service and love
- John 15:1–17 — Abide in Christ
- John 21:15–19 — Feed my sheep

Possible Epistle Readings

- Acts 20:17–38 — Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders
- Romans 8:31–39 — Nothing separates us from God’s love
- Romans 12:1–18 — Life together in the body of Christ
- 1 Corinthians 3:4–11 — God gives the growth
- 1 Corinthians 12:4–27 — Many members, one body
- Philippians 1:3–11 — Thanksgiving for shared ministry
- Philippians 3:12–16 — Pressing on toward what lies ahead
- Philippians 4:4–9 — Rejoice, pray, and dwell on what is worthy
- Colossians 3:12–17 — Clothe yourselves with love
- 1 Thessalonians 5:12–24 — Encourage one another
- 2 Timothy 4:6–8 — Finishing the race
- Hebrews 12:1–2 — Running with perseverance
- 1 Peter 5:1–11 — Shepherding with humility

Scripture Selection

Primary reading: _____

Additional reading: _____

Psalm: _____

Reader or readers: _____

Reason these readings were selected:

Avoid choosing so many farewell readings that the service becomes burdened by the theme of departure. One or two well-chosen passages are usually sufficient.

Part Six: Plan the Sermon

The final sermon carries unusual emotional weight. It should remain a sermon: a proclamation of God’s grace grounded in scripture.

The Final Sermon Should

- direct attention toward God;
- proclaim the good news;
- honor the congregation without idealizing it;
- acknowledge the ending without making the entire sermon autobiographical;
- avoid settling old disagreements;

- avoid defending the pastor's record;
- avoid directing the congregation's future decisions;
- avoid comparing the departing pastor with future leadership;
- resist asking the congregation to preserve the pastor's programs or priorities;
- leave the congregation free to continue its ministry; and
- trust God with what remains unfinished.

Sermon Review Questions

- ☐ Is the sermon grounded in scripture?
 - ☐ Is God the central actor?
 - ☐ Does the sermon speak to the congregation rather than merely about the pastor?
 - ☐ Does it acknowledge the ending honestly?
 - ☐ Does it avoid private or confidential stories?
 - ☐ Does it refrain from correcting critics or rewarding allies?
 - ☐ Does it release the congregation from protecting the pastor's legacy?
 - ☐ Does it avoid giving instructions that belong to future pastoral leadership?
 - ☐ Does it leave room for grief, gratitude, and hope?
 - ☐ Does it point beyond the departing pastor to Christ and the continuing life of the church?
-

Part Seven: Choose Music

Music can hold emotions that spoken words cannot. Select music the congregation can sing together rather than creating a concert centered on the pastor's preferences.

Themes for Music

- ☐ God's faithfulness
- ☐ Gratitude
- ☐ Christian unity
- ☐ Service
- ☐ Journey
- ☐ Trust
- ☐ Blessing
- ☐ Sending

☐ Hope☐ The continuing mission of the church**Music Planning**

Place in Service	Selection	Leader or Group	Confirmed
Prelude			☐
Gathering hymn or song			☐
Response to scripture			☐
Thanksgiving or offering			☐
Act of release			☐
Closing hymn or song			☐
Postlude			☐

Music Checklist

- ☐ Selections are singable for the congregation.
 - ☐ Music reflects the church's theology and tradition.
 - ☐ The service includes familiar congregational music.
 - ☐ Musicians have adequate preparation time.
 - ☐ Copyright and streaming requirements have been addressed.
 - ☐ A personally meaningful selection is included only with the pastor's consent.
 - ☐ Music does not imply that the pastor has died.
 - ☐ The amount of special music does not overwhelm the service.
-

Part Eight: Plan Communion or Other Sacramental Practice within Proclaiming the Word

Some congregations may celebrate Communion—also called the Lord's Supper or Eucharist—or follow another sacramental or ordinance practice in the final service. Where it is celebrated, place it within Proclaiming the Word so that Word and Table form a unified proclamation of God's grace in Jesus Christ, according to the congregation's theology and customary language.

Congregations that do not celebrate Communion in the final service, or that understand the relationship of Word and Table differently, should adapt this architecture without contradicting their tradition. In every case, avoid presenting the sacrament or ordinance as the pastor's personal possession or merely as a final administration.

Discernment Questions

1. Is this consistent with the congregation's normal practice?

2. Does denominational polity permit the departing pastor to preside?
3. Will the sacrament direct attention toward Christ and the whole church?
4. Can it be celebrated without turning it into a personal possession of the departing pastor?
5. Will the service remain a manageable length?
6. Does the congregation have unresolved sacramental or theological concerns that make another occasion more appropriate?

Decision

☐ The service will include: _____

☐ The service will not include a sacrament or ordinance.

Presider: _____

Assistants: _____

Special arrangements:

Part Nine: Include the Pastor's Family with Care

A pastor's spouse, partner, children, or other family members may also be leaving relationships and routines. They should be recognized only in ways they welcome.

Family Participation

- ☐ The family has been asked how they wish to participate.
- ☐ Family members know the order of service.
- ☐ Participation is voluntary.
- ☐ Children and youth are not required to speak publicly.
- ☐ The congregation will not imply that family members held pastoral office.
- ☐ Family members will not be thanked for sacrifices they did not choose to discuss publicly.
- ☐ Names and relationships are listed accurately.
- ☐ Seating and accessibility needs are arranged.
- ☐ A private space is available if needed.
- ☐ A designated person will support the family during the service.

Agreed form of recognition:

Part Ten: Prepare the Act of Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving should name God's grace through the shared ministry without claiming that everything was successful or that every person had the same experience.

Possible Areas of Thanksgiving

- worship and preaching;
- sacraments or ordinances;
- pastoral care;
- teaching and formation;
- children's and youth ministry;
- congregational leadership;
- community engagement;
- mission and service;
- justice and mercy;
- seasons of celebration;
- times of crisis;
- ordinary weekly ministry;
- relationships formed;
- growth in faith; and
- lessons learned through difficulty.

Preparing Specific Thanksgivings

Invite several people to name brief, concrete expressions of gratitude.

Participant	Area of Shared Ministry	Time Allowed
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Guidelines

- ☐ Each contribution is brief.
 - ☐ Speakers represent more than one part of the congregation.
 - ☐ Children or youth may participate appropriately.
 - ☐ Staff members are included only if they wish.
 - ☐ Contributions are specific rather than exaggerated.
 - ☐ No one claims to speak for every person.
 - ☐ Confidential information is protected.
 - ☐ Thanksgiving does not become a lengthy testimonial program.
-

Part Eleven: Make Room for Truth and Confession

Every ministry is incomplete. Things that should have been done may remain undone. Words may have wounded. Expectations may have gone unmet. Pastor and congregation may both carry regret.

The final service is not the place to identify particular grievances publicly. It can, however, acknowledge shared human limitation and seek God's mercy.

A Prayer of Confession

Leader: Let us come before God with honesty and humility.

Departing Pastor:

Gracious God, I give thanks for the people you entrusted to my care and for the ministry we shared. I confess that I did not always serve with the wisdom, courage, patience, or love to which you called me. Some work remains unfinished. Some needs were not recognized. Some words and decisions may have caused hurt. For these and for all my failures in this ministry, I ask your mercy.

Congregation:

Gracious God, we give thanks for the pastor who has served among us and for the ministry we shared. We confess that we did not always receive, support, question, forgive, or serve with the wisdom, courage, patience, or love to which you called us. Some expectations were unfair. Some gratitude went unspoken. Some words and decisions may have caused hurt. For these and for all our failures in this relationship, we ask your mercy.

All:

Merciful God, forgive what needs forgiveness. Heal what can be healed. Receive what remains unfinished. Free us from the need to defend ourselves or judge one another. By your grace, lead us into peace and make us ready for the paths now before us. Amen.

Assurance of Grace

Leader:

Hear the good news: God's mercy is greater than our failures, and God's faithfulness is not ended by our incompleteness. In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven, renewed, and set free to walk in love.

All: Thanks be to God.

Use with Pastoral Care

This prayer should not be used to force either pastor or congregation to accept responsibility for unnamed serious misconduct. When allegations, disciplinary matters, abuse, or substantial unresolved harm are present, consult denominational and professional guidance. Public worship must not be used to conceal wrongdoing, compel reconciliation, or silence those who have been harmed.

Part Twelve: Prepare the Formal Act of Release

The act of release is the heart of the final service. It states that the pastoral relationship is ending and that pastor and congregation are no longer bound to one another by its responsibilities and expectations.

This act should be adapted to denominational requirements. If an authorized liturgy exists, use it.

Introduction to the Act of Release

Leader:

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we have gathered in the presence of God to mark the conclusion of the pastoral relationship between the Reverend _____ and _____ congregation.

During this season of ministry, pastor and people have worshiped, served, learned, grieved, rejoiced, struggled, and grown together. Today we give thanks for what has been shared. We also acknowledge that this relationship is ending, and we release one another for the different paths now before us.

Questions to the Departing Pastor

Leader:

Reverend _____, do you give thanks for the ministry entrusted to you among this people?

Pastor:

I do, with gratitude to God.

Leader:

Do you acknowledge that your service as pastor of this congregation is ending?

Pastor:

I do.

Leader:

Do you release this congregation from its responsibilities and expectations toward you as its pastor?

Pastor:

I do, trusting them to the continuing care of God.

Leader:

Do you release the congregation to receive the ministry of those who will serve after you, without requiring them to preserve your leadership, seek your approval, or maintain your ways of doing ministry?

Pastor:

I do, with God's help.

Leader:

Will you honor the boundaries that follow the conclusion of this pastoral relationship and refrain from continuing as pastor through informal counsel, private influence, or pastoral acts not appropriately authorized?

Pastor:

I will, with God's help.

Questions to the Congregation

The congregation may stand as able.

Leader:

People of _____ congregation, do you give thanks for the ministry you have shared with Reverend _____?

Congregation:

We do, with gratitude to God.

Leader:

Do you acknowledge that Reverend _____'s service as your pastor is ending?

Congregation:

We do.

Leader:

Do you release Reverend _____ from the responsibilities and expectations of being your pastor?

Congregation:

We do, trusting them to the continuing care of God.

Leader:

Will you refrain from asking Reverend _____ to continue as your pastor through counseling, ceremonies, decisions, private influence, or other pastoral acts after this relationship has ended?

Congregation:

We will, with God's help.

Leader:

Will you receive the ministry of those who serve during the transition and allow future pastoral relationships to grow with freedom and integrity?

Congregation:

We will, with God's help.

Mutual Release

The pastor and a congregational representative may face one another.

Pastor:

I release you from the responsibilities you carried toward me as your pastor. I give thanks for the ministry we have shared, and I entrust your continuing life and service to God.

Congregational Representative:

We release you from the responsibilities you carried as our pastor. We give thanks for the ministry we have shared, and we entrust your continuing life and service to God.

Pastor and Congregation:

With gratitude for what has been, with honesty about what remains incomplete, and with trust in God for what lies ahead, we release one another in peace.

Declaration**Leader:**

By the authority entrusted to me and in accordance with the order of the church, I declare that the pastoral relationship between Reverend _____ and _____ congregation will conclude on _____.

May God bless what has been shared, heal what has been wounded, receive what remains unfinished, and guide pastor and congregation in the days ahead.

All: Amen.

If no authorized declaration is appropriate, the leader may say:

We now acknowledge before God that this pastoral relationship has come to its conclusion. May God grant pastor and congregation grace to honor this ending and freedom to walk faithfully into what comes next.

Part Thirteen: Bless the Departing Pastor and Family

The congregation may extend a hand toward the pastor and family without physical contact. If laying on of hands is customary, obtain consent and follow denominational practice.

Congregational Prayer of Blessing

Leader: Let us pray.

Congregation:

Faithful God,
we give thanks for _____
and for the ministry shared among us.

For words proclaimed,
sacraments celebrated,
prayers offered,
care extended,
questions asked,
decisions made,
burdens carried,
joys shared,
and ordinary days of faithful service,
we give you thanks.

Bless _____ in the leaving.
Grant rest where there is weariness,
healing where there is hurt,
humility where there is regret,
and joy in the gifts this ministry has given.

Bless those who share this departure.
Surround them with friendship, patience, and peace.
Prepare the way before them,
and give them freedom to receive the life to which you now call them.

Keep them in your grace.
Guide their going out and their coming in.
Let the love of Christ sustain them,
the wisdom of the Spirit lead them,
and your faithful presence accompany them
all their days.

Amen.

Part Fourteen: Bless the Congregation

The departing pastor may offer a final prayer for the congregation. This prayer should bless rather than direct, claim, or control the congregation's future.

Pastor's Prayer for the Congregation

Pastor:

Faithful God,
I give thanks for the people of _____ congregation
and for the life we have shared in your service.

Bless them in this time of change.
When they are uncertain, grant them patience.
When they grieve, grant them comfort.
When they disagree, grant them wisdom and charity.
When they grow weary, renew their strength.

Guard the staff and leaders who will carry new responsibilities.
Sustain those who offer pastoral care.
Keep this congregation attentive to the lonely,
the suffering, the forgotten, and the stranger.

Free them from the need to preserve my ministry.
Give them courage to receive new leadership,
to discover gifts not yet known,
and to follow where your Spirit leads.

Let their worship be joyful,
their fellowship generous,
their witness courageous,
and their service faithful.

Complete in them the good work you have begun,
not for the honor of any pastor,
but for the glory of Jesus Christ
and the life of the world you love.

Amen.

Part Fifteen: Exchange Words of Peace

If appropriate to the congregation's tradition, pastor and people may exchange a sign of peace after the act of release.

Invitation

Leader:

Having given thanks, spoken truth, and released one another, let us share the peace of Christ.

The peace of Christ be with you.

Congregation:

And also with you.

The exchange should remain manageable. If the pastor will greet people following worship, the service need not become an extended receiving line at this point.

Part Sixteen: A Complete Adaptable Order of Worship

The following service may be adapted to the congregation's tradition.

Gathering

Prelude

Welcome

Leader:

Welcome to worship.

Today we gather on the final Sunday of Reverend _____'s ministry among us. We come with gratitude for what we have shared, with honesty about the incompleteness present in every ministry, and with trust in the God whose faithfulness carries both pastor and congregation into the future.

This service will include an act of thanksgiving and release. In that act, we will acknowledge that this pastoral relationship is ending, release one another from its responsibilities, and ask God's blessing upon those who go and those who remain.

Let us worship God.

Call to Worship

Leader:

For everything there is a season,

People:

and a time for every matter under heaven.

Leader:

A time to begin and a time to end,

People:

a time to welcome and a time to release.

Leader:

God has been our dwelling place in every generation.

People:

God will be our guide in every season.

Leader:

Let us give thanks for what has been.

People:

Let us trust God with what will be.

Leader:

Let us worship the Lord.

Opening Hymn or Song**Opening Prayer**

Faithful God,
you call your people into fellowship,
give gifts for ministry,
and accompany us through every beginning and ending.

Receive our worship this day.
Open our hearts to gratitude,
give us courage to speak truth,
and grant us grace to release one another in peace.

Through your Word, renew our trust.
Through our prayers, deepen our love.
Through this ending, remind us
that Jesus Christ remains the head of the church
and the shepherd of your people.

Amen.

Confession**Prayer of Confession**

Use the prayer in Part Eleven or another act of confession directed toward God and appropriate to the congregation's tradition. In a difficult departure, use the safeguards in Part Seventeen and do not impose generalized mutuality.

Silence

Assurance or Declaration of Grace

Proclaiming the Word**Prayer for Illumination**

God of wisdom,
by your Spirit open these scriptures to us.
Speak a word strong enough to hold our memories,
gentle enough to meet our grief,
and faithful enough to lead us forward.
Amen.

Scripture Reading**Psalm or Musical Response****Gospel or Epistle Reading**

Sermon

Silence

Response to the Word

Hymn, Song, or Affirmation of Faith

Prayers of the People

The prayers may include:

- thanksgiving for the shared ministry;
- prayer for the departing pastor and family;
- prayer for staff and congregational leaders;
- prayer for those experiencing grief or uncertainty;
- prayer for people whose experience of the ministry was difficult;
- prayer for the congregation's continuing mission;
- prayer for the wider church and world; and
- trust in God's guidance.

Offering

The offering remains an offering to God and should not be confused with a personal gift for the pastor. Any congregational gift should be handled and identified separately.

Communion or Other Sacramental Practice, If Included

Where Communion is celebrated, place it here as part of the unified proclamation of the Good News in Word and Table, using the congregation's approved language and practice.

Response and Thanksgiving

Introduction

Leader:

We now come before God to give thanks for the ministry shared by Reverend _____ and _____ congregation, to acknowledge what remains incomplete, and to release one another for the paths ahead.

Expressions of Thanksgiving

Selected participants offer brief expressions of gratitude.

After each contribution, the congregation may respond:

People: Thanks be to God.

Act of Release

Use the liturgy in Part Twelve or the service required by the denomination.

Exchange of Peace

Announcements

Keep announcements brief. Provide clear information about any farewell reception and the congregation's immediate pastoral-care arrangements.

Blessing

Congregational Prayer of Blessing

Use the prayer in Part Thirteen.

Pastor's Prayer for the Congregation

Use the prayer in Part Fourteen.

Closing Hymn or Song

Final Blessing by the Departing Pastor

Pastor:

People of God,
whatever was faithful in our ministry together,
may God bring to fullness.

Whatever was incomplete,
may God receive with mercy.

Whatever was wounded,
may God hold in healing.

Whatever lies ahead,
may God meet us there.

May the grace of Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with you and remain with you,
this day and always.

People: Amen.

Congregational Blessing for the Pastor

Congregation:

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord be gracious to you.
May Christ walk beside you,
and may the Holy Spirit guide you
in every place your journey leads.

Go with our gratitude.
Go with our prayers.
Go in peace.

Dismissal

Leader:

Our worship has ended. Our service continues.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

People:

Thanks be to God.

Part Seventeen: Alternative Language for Different Circumstances

A Retirement

When the pastor is retiring, the service may acknowledge the conclusion of active pastoral service without implying that the pastor's vocation or Christian service has ended.

Possible language:

Today we mark both the conclusion of this pastoral relationship and Reverend _____'s retirement from active pastoral ministry. We give thanks for the years of service offered to Christ's church and pray for grace, rest, discovery, and faithful life in the season ahead.

Avoid treating retirement as death, disappearance, or the end of meaningful calling.

Departure to Another Call

Possible language:

Reverend _____ has received a call to serve _____. Today we give thanks for the ministry shared here and release our pastor to receive the responsibilities of that new call with freedom and integrity.

The service should not compare the two congregations or imply that one call is more important than the other.

Resignation Without a New Call

Possible language:

Reverend _____'s ministry among us is concluding, although the shape of the next season is not yet known. We release our pastor from the expectation of having every next step settled and pray for rest, wisdom, and God's guidance.

Do not require the pastor to explain private vocational, family, health, or personal circumstances.

Departure for Health or Family Reasons

Possible language:

Reverend _____'s ministry among us is concluding because attention is now needed elsewhere. We honor the privacy surrounding this decision and pray for strength, care, healing, and peace in the season ahead.

Do not disclose information beyond what the pastor has authorized.

Completion of Transitional or Interim Ministry

Possible language:

Reverend _____ was called to serve among us for a particular season of transition. That appointed work is now concluding. We give thanks for the leadership offered during this season and release our pastor from responsibility for the decisions and relationships that will belong to the congregation's next chapter.

A Difficult or Painful Departure

When a departure follows conflict, disappointment, misconduct, discipline, or fractured trust, do not force the standard language of mutual gratitude or reconciliation.

A simpler service may include:

- scripture;
- silence;
- lament;
- prayer for mercy and protection;
- a factual acknowledgment that the pastoral relationship has ended;
- a clear release from pastoral authority;
- prayer for all affected; and
- trust in God's continuing care.

Possible language:

Today we acknowledge before God that the pastoral relationship between Reverend _____ and _____ congregation has ended. We recognize that people carry different experiences and emotions and that some matters may remain unresolved. We will not attempt to settle those matters in this service. We place before God our grief, our questions, our need for truth and healing, and our hope for faithful life beyond this ending.

Where serious harm is alleged or established:

- follow denominational and legal requirements;
- protect those who may have been harmed;
- do not use worship to secure forgiveness or reconciliation;
- do not ask injured people to participate in blessing the pastor;
- do not imply that mutual fault is always equal;
- do not disclose confidential details;
- do not allow the service to interfere with investigation or accountability; and
- obtain guidance from qualified denominational and professional leaders.

Part Eighteen: Accessibility and Participation

The service should be accessible to the whole congregation.

Accessibility Checklist

- ☐ Entrances and seating are physically accessible.
 - ☐ Large-print materials are available.
 - ☐ Hearing-assistance devices are available if possible.
 - ☐ Microphones will be used consistently.
 - ☐ Spoken instructions are also printed where appropriate.
 - ☐ Online participants can hear and see essential parts of the service.
 - ☐ Captions are provided when available.
 - ☐ Communion or other sacramental practices accommodate mobility needs.
 - ☐ Children and youth can participate meaningfully.
 - ☐ Homebound members have been offered a way to participate.
 - ☐ The service's emotional intensity has been considered.
 - ☐ A quiet or private space is available.
-

Part Nineteen: Worship Bulletin Checklist

The bulletin or digital worship guide should include:

- ☐ Accurate date and service title
- ☐ Names of worship leaders
- ☐ Complete congregational responses
- ☐ Scripture references
- ☐ Hymn or song information
- ☐ The act of release
- ☐ Prayers of blessing
- ☐ Information about the farewell gathering
- ☐ Current pastoral-care contact information
- ☐ Appropriate acknowledgment of guests

- ☐ Copyright and licensing information
- ☐ Accessibility information
- ☐ Correct spelling of the pastor's and family members' names

The bulletin should not include:

- ☐ Confidential details about the departure
 - ☐ A comprehensive history of the pastor's ministry
 - ☐ Unapproved photographs or personal information
 - ☐ Language implying the pastor will continue in a pastoral role
 - ☐ Speculation about future leadership
-

Part Twenty: Final-Service Planning Checklist

Four to Six Weeks Before

- ☐ Consult denominational requirements.
- ☐ Confirm the service date and time.
- ☐ Identify the presider, preacher, and leader of the release.
- ☐ Form the worship-planning group.
- ☐ Consult the pastor and family.
- ☐ Choose scripture.
- ☐ Select music.
- ☐ Decide whether to include a sacrament or ordinance.
- ☐ Identify congregational participants.
- ☐ Determine accessibility needs.
- ☐ Coordinate with the farewell-celebration team.

Two to Three Weeks Before

- ☐ Draft the order of worship.
- ☐ Prepare the act of thanksgiving and release.
- ☐ Confirm speakers and readers.

- ☐ Provide guidance and time limits.
- ☐ Confirm musicians and technical support.
- ☐ Draft the bulletin.
- ☐ Review post-departure boundary language.
- ☐ Confirm the pastor's final blessing.
- ☐ Prepare communication for homebound and online participants.

One Week Before

- ☐ Review the complete service with all principal leaders.
- ☐ Confirm denominational approval if required.
- ☐ Proofread names, dates, responses, and contact information.
- ☐ Rehearse the act of release.
- ☐ Confirm placement and movement of participants.
- ☐ Test microphones, livestreaming, and projection.
- ☐ Prepare large-print or accessible materials.
- ☐ Confirm plans for children and youth.
- ☐ Coordinate announcements about the farewell gathering.
- ☐ Confirm who will respond if an unexpected or inappropriate contribution occurs.

Before the Service

- ☐ Worship space is prepared.
- ☐ Bulletins and accessible materials are available.
- ☐ Sound and streaming systems are tested.
- ☐ Readers, speakers, musicians, and leaders are present.
- ☐ The pastor and family know where to sit and when to move.
- ☐ The denominational representative has the final order.
- ☐ Pastoral-care contact information is accurate.
- ☐ A private space is available if needed.
- ☐ The service will begin and end at reasonable times.

After the Service

- ☐ The formal ending is honored.
 - ☐ The congregation knows whom to contact for pastoral care.
 - ☐ The pastor is not expected to resume duties after the service.
 - ☐ Worship materials are retained in congregational records.
 - ☐ Recordings are distributed or posted only as authorized.
 - ☐ Any sacramental records are completed.
 - ☐ The pastor receives a copy of the bulletin or service.
 - ☐ Follow-up pastoral care is offered by current authorized leaders.
-

Part Twenty-One: Final Review

Before approving the service, ask:

1. Is this clearly worship of God rather than a tribute program?

2. Does the service express gratitude without idealizing the ministry?

3. Does it acknowledge incompleteness without staging public conflict?

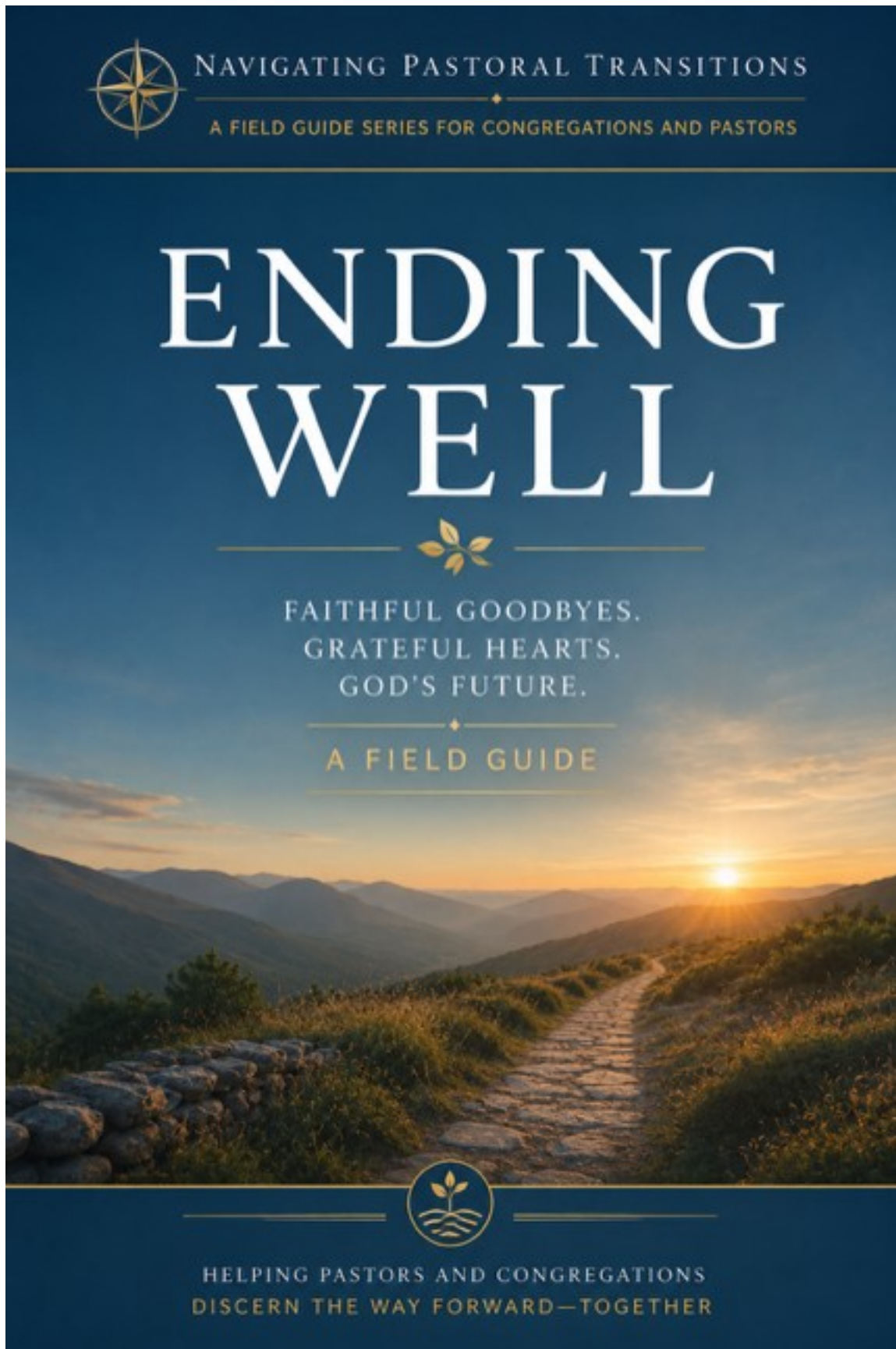
4. Does the act of release clearly end pastoral authority and expectations?

5. Are the congregation, staff, pastor, and family treated with care?

6. Does the service protect the freedom of future pastoral leadership?

7. Is the gospel proclaimed?

8. Does the service follow Gathering, Confession, Proclaiming the Word, Response and Thanksgiving, and Blessing—and end clearly at the dismissal?
-



A Final Word

A pastoral relationship begins within the life and calling of the church. There it should also be allowed to end.

The final worship service neither erases what was difficult nor preserves everything that was good. It gathers the ministry—faithfulness and failure, joy and sorrow, completion and unfinished work—and entrusts it to God.

Pastor and congregation give thanks, tell the truth, release one another, and receive a blessing they do not control.

Then they go separate ways beneath the same mercy, accompanied by the same Spirit and held in God's continuing faithfulness.

Go in peace.

Field Manual Literary Editing Note

1. Principal literary improvements

The manuscript's architecture, resource sequence, worksheets, safeguards, and liturgical structure remain intact. The literary pass tightened openings, improved sentence movement, clarified transitions into practical tools, and gave each resource a more distinct closing cadence.

2. Recurring language and rhetorical patterns tightened

Repeated purpose formulas, paired negative-and-positive constructions, strings of abstract qualities, and recurring phrases about "faithful endings" were reduced where they added no new meaning. Parallel phrasing was retained where it supports spoken use, prayer, or clear instruction.

3. Repetition intentionally retained for stand-alone use

Essential reminders about confidentiality, polity, authority, staff supervision, pastoral-care transfer, financial accountability, accessibility, serious harm, and post-departure boundaries remain in the resources where users need them independently.

4. Introductions and transitions improved

Longer openings now reach the practical task more quickly while preserving necessary scope. Transitional prose was made more direct, especially where explanation leads into checklists, handoff fields, boundary decisions, or worship planning.

5. Concluding pastoral words differentiated

Resource conclusions were shortened and given more particular emphasis: readiness in FM 1.1, trustworthy communication in FM 1.2 and FM 1.3, truthful remembering in FM 2.1, gratitude in FM 2.2, transfer and release in FM 5.1 and FM 5.2, immediate stability in FM 7.1, boundaries in FM 8.1, communal farewell in FM 9.1, and worshipful release in FM 9.2.

6. Sample language refined

Selected spoken responses were made shorter and more conversational without weakening authority, consent, confidentiality, accountability, or denominational adaptability. Distinct language for difficult departures and unequal responsibility was preserved.

7. Passages requiring authorial or theological decision

The manuscript does not present a major unresolved theological issue. Before publication, an author or denominational reviewer should still confirm tradition-specific sacramental language, authorized forms of release, terminology for governing and judicatory bodies, and any required period of separation after departure.

8. Matters reserved for copyediting

The next pass should settle punctuation, capitalization, hyphenation, scripture-reference style, list punctuation, checkbox conventions, heading-label consistency, preferred denominational terms, and capitalization of Communion and related sacramental language.

9. Matters reserved for formatting and production

Heading styles, page breaks, writing space, table behavior, navigation, running heads and folios, accessibility tagging, table of contents, final typography, and print and digital production checks remain outside this literary pass.