



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.



LEAVING A LEGACY OF
MISSION AND MINISTRY
*A resource for the closing of a
congregation*

*For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-4)*

Some congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) are going through challenging times. It is possible that your congregation is in this category and you are struggling with the reality that the congregation you love has been slowly losing its capacity to engage the community and sustain effective ministry. Your congregation may be in the final stages of its life cycle.

When you reach this time of discernment, contact your synod bishop who will provide oversight to your congregation throughout the process. This workbook is designed to provide basic guidance to the congregation in both its administrative responsibilities as well as in legacy planning, to provide dignity and hope as you seek to carry forward your faith in Jesus Christ and continue to fulfill God's mission to change and save lives.

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Suggested resources for additional reading:

- “Ending with Hope,” Beth Ann Gaede, Editor; Alban Institute 2002, now Rowman & Littlefield
- “Legacy Churches,” Stephen Gray and Franklin Dumond; ChurchSmart 2009

This resource includes material used with permission and adapted from:

- Workbooks of the New Jersey and Southwestern Texas synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
- “Ending with Hope,” Beth Ann Gaede, Editor; Alban Institute 2002, now Rowman & Littlefield
- “Legacy Churches,” Stephen Gray and Franklin Dumond; ChurchSmart 2009
- The Lutheran magazine, April 2012, now Living Lutheran.
- Liturgical texts from Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services for the Assembly © 2009 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, admin. Augsburg Fortress. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

The unspoken desire of every congregation is to be a beacon of change and to leave a lasting legacy. No congregation was ever started for the purpose of making a minimal impact on its community. Every congregation wants to leave its mark on the world. Leaving a legacy, however, means more than simply opening the doors on a Sunday morning. For struggling congregations, the fight to stay alive is often seen as a badge of honor and an act of final obedience. No matter the good intentions of the remaining few members, if the congregation:

- Has become inward looking and makes little difference in its surrounding community
- Is depleting or has depleted its capital assets to pay for current expenses
- Is unable to maintain its property and have sufficient reserves for longer-term property needs
- Cannot cover current operating expenses without cutting back on important ministries
- Is unduly reliant on sources of funding outside the offerings of members
- Has insufficient number of members to serve on Council or to hold legal congregation meetings

It is time to have a serious conversation about the sustainability of the parish ministry and the continuing ability of the congregation to be accountable for its affairs.

In reality, a congregation is a fellowship of the baptized that has a life cycle – a beginning, middle and end. The congregations in the Book of Acts have not survived into the present day, but the fruit and seeds of their witness live on today in hundreds of thousands of congregations and millions of Christians in present time. External forces such as changed landscapes, loss of population, aging, and the rapid pace of change make institutions vulnerable. Internal dynamics such as resistance to change, long service by the same workers, mismanaged conflict, deficit spending and eroding relationships rob us of sustainability.

The greatest witness that we can share is to trust that God's plan is still in play, even when our congregation struggles against seemingly insurmountable odds. Jesus told the crowds,

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24)

Seed can be used to produce another glorious fruit tree, if it is planted. God can use the seed found within a closing of a congregation to produce more fruit and enable your congregation to leave a legacy of mission and ministry.

The following matters may seem tedious, but they can ease your frustration and curb your fears while contemplating the end of the visible presence of your congregation.

DECIDING TO BRING THE CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY TO A CLOSE

When it becomes apparent that the ability of the congregation to remain effectively engaged in ministry is in jeopardy, schedule a consultation with your synod bishop to develop a plan for discernment. This plan will usually include conversation with synod leaders and leaders from neighboring congregations. A decision to close a ministry should be made only after an extended time of prayer, study and conversation. Due to the seriousness of the action, this will require a called meeting of the congregation and the required notification to the Synod Council. (Appendix I contains a template for enabling resolutions related to discontinuing ministry.) In addition to deciding to close out the ministry of the congregation, plans should be initiated for legacy planning (Appendix III) and for a final worship service and celebration of ministry (Appendix IV).

Once a decision has been made, in consultation with the synod, to close ministry, the closing happens in phases and in a dedicated sequence. (Appendix II contains the necessary steps in the dissolution of a congregation.)

A legacy of hope

When the time came to close their doors and think about their legacy as a congregation, members of Eidskog Lutheran Church, rural Ortonville, Minn., wanted to pass on their assets for the benefit of another congregation. They decided to place an advertisement in the ELCA's magazine, *The Lutheran*, offering the altar, pulpit, lectern, organ and pews in addition to other worship and kitchen items.

The ad was noticed by a member of Hope Lutheran Church in River Falls, Wis. Hope Lutheran has worshiped as a community for 10 years and was in the process of working on a new building site. Eidskog members offered all items to Hope free of charge – which was gratefully accepted. Hope Lutheran now had everything needed to complete their new building.

When Eidskog Lutheran held their service of closing, some members from Hope traveled to worship with the congregation that Sunday. While members of Eidskog were saddened to have their congregation close, they were happy to share this legacy gift that will be used into the future.

LEGACY PLANNING

It is important that the congregation contact their synod for assistance in crafting the congregational legacy plan. The synod will assist in guiding the conversation and assuring that matters are conducted faithfully and with appropriate pastoral care. The legacy plan will consist of several parts:

Care of members: Of primary concern is the care and nurture of the congregation members. Working with members to transfer membership to a selected congregation will be an important part of the pastor's role (when available) during the final months and days of the congregation's life. A "shepherding congregation" may also be identified to receive members. The membership records of any member who does not indicate their intention to transfer into an alternate congregation should go to your synod along with pastoral records. Members of the congregation may in some instances, call upon the pastor of the shepherding congregation for care and counsel following the final worship service of the congregation.

Care of the pastor: It will be essential that the pastor remain with and among the congregation through the end of the public congregational ministry. In order to ensure that the pastor will be cared for, and to provide for the pastor while seeking a subsequent call, it is recommended that the congregation consider an appropriate severance.

Legacy directives: The congregation will approve legacy directives that will direct the disbursement of the mission assets of the congregation in a fashion that will honor the legacy of the saints who have gone before, prosper the church, and advance the kingdom of God. Determining how to direct the church property can be both an enormous project and a joyful opportunity to seed new ministry and continue the congregation's legacy in other places.

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

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

In other words, once something is given to a church, it belongs solely to the church. If a congregation closes, where the items go is to be determined in accordance with IRS requirements, state law, and the Constitutions, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of the ELCA. The congregation cannot open the door and allow a free-for-all. Nor can an individual come back and say, "I bought that for the church, so I want it back." Absent any action, any undisposed property passes to the synod.

Another important aspect of the non-profit tax code is also found in Section 501 (c)(3) in the "Dissolution" clause. If a church decides to close its doors, it is required to dispose of the remaining assets by transferring them to other exempt organizations or governmental agencies, as stated above.

After consultation with your synod, you may decide to distribute your assets to another congregation, the synod, ELCA churchwide ministries, ELCA Mission Support (undesignated giving), Lutheran Social

Services, global ministries, etc. However, members or officers do not qualify. Care should always be taken to preserve the original intention of the church founders. (“Legacy Churches,” p. 84-85, ChurchSmart 2009 and Rules for IRS section 501(c)(3) organization, chapter 3)

Appendix III gives instructions for conducting a legacy workshop in which the congregation can make appropriate and faithful allocations of mission assets that will plant seeds that bear fruit.

LEGACY PLANNING PARAMETERS

The legacy directives prepared by the congregation will need to honor certain parameters. Closing a congregational ministry is painful. There is no way to soften the impact of this decision. It will take time to process the closure decisions in such a way that enable the development of new ministries through the wise allocation of congregational assets. By honoring this process, however, the history and vision of the founding and sustaining members can be honored.

The strategic investment of the mission assets from your congregation can help catapult congregational, synodical, and churchwide ministries and global initiatives and the important work of ministry partners forward with the gospel of Christ. Do not allow the assets to be frittered away. God doesn't need us to bury those resources but to use them.

Your synod will help establish the mechanisms for sharing your legacy and will make concrete suggestions on how your resources might most effectively support the ministry that we share together as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

A simple form of legacy directive could be to ask the synod if it will manage and dispose of the congregation's property, with the assets being placed in the synod's fund for mission and used at the direction of the Synod Council to support mission development and the strengthening of congregational ministries in the synod. Please recognize that your congregation's constitution and the ELCA Constitution direct that, upon dissolution, all undisposed assets go to the ministries of your synod.

A conversation related to allocation should begin with your synod. Some possible options might be:

- 10 percent (tithe) to ELCA churchwide ministries or ELCA Mission Support.
- 50 percent supporting congregational ministry development in the synod. (This may include support of new mission congregations, transforming ministries, or other strategic mission initiatives.)
- 10 percent supporting ELCA domestic and global ministry initiatives. (This may include ELCA World Hunger, Missionary Support, Lutheran Disaster Response, etc.)
- 20 percent supporting ministry partners and other strategic ministries.
- 10 percent supporting community based programs that have been traditionally networked with the congregation.

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

Final legacy directives will be approved by a majority of voting members present at a properly called congregation meeting, except in those states that require a two-thirds vote by a congregation, to dispose of property. The council president will sign and forward three copies of the directives to the bishop. These directives will be reviewed and received by the Synod Council. After the bishop attests the directives, a copy may remain with the synod, a copy may be returned to the congregation president, and a copy may be placed in the congregation archives.

Archive historical materials: Congregations have massive amounts of “stuff” that is collected over the years. Congregations will want to contact the synod so that official records and valuable historical materials can be archived and preserved. The synod will assist in identifying and cataloging this material. A fee may be assessed by the synod for this preservation, cataloging and archive storage. After appropriate material is archived, the congregation may distribute memorabilia that is of no market or archival value but may possess great sentimental value.

Property and buildings: Property and buildings can only be sold through a properly called congregational meeting. The Congregation Council and Synod Council will distribute the proceeds in accordance with the legacy directives.

Continuing diligence: In order to expedite the transfer of responsibilities and provide for sustained monitoring of the affairs of the congregation after the dissolution of the Congregation Council, please provide the appropriate documents and materials listed in Appendix II to the synod. This material will allow the synod to respond to questions and legal inquiries subsequent to the closing of the congregational ministry.

A resurrection story

Only the front doors were left standing after a fire that destroyed Zion Lutheran in Oriska, N.D. The congregation could have simply closed, and its members could have attended other area congregations, but concern for their Sunday school youth compelled them to rebuild.

About that same time Blanchard Lutheran, 50 miles to the northeast, was deciding that its ministry was complete and it was time to close after 75 years. Through coordination with their synod bishop, a conversation between the two congregations soon took place about what might be donated from a dying church so another could live – and a resurrection story was born.

Zion had lost everything and Blanchard Lutheran, in its closing, gave new life to Zion Lutheran. Many items were shared, and Blanchard even donated its cross from the top of the church. Members from both churches gathered at Zion as the donated items and the new church were dedicated. As one church closed, another rose from the ashes.

APPENDIX I

Motion to discontinue ministry

When it becomes apparent that the ability of the congregation to remain effectively engaged in ministry is in jeopardy, schedule a consultation of the congregation with your synod bishop or designee to develop a plan for discernment. This plan will usually include conversation with the bishop, the synod's director of evangelical mission, and leaders from neighboring congregations. Decisions about bringing a ministry to a close will only happen after a time of prayer, study and conversation. The decision to close a ministry will require a properly called meeting of the congregation as required by polity and statute.

A sample resolution for discontinuance of ministry follows. **Check your state law to make sure a resolution is sufficient and the necessary type of majority needed to approve it.** After the appropriate resolution is adopted, signed and attested, a copy shall be forwarded to the bishop of the synod.

_____ Lutheran Church
_____, _____ (insert city and state)

Congregation meeting date _____

Be it resolved that: We the members of _____ Lutheran Church declare our intention to discontinue ministry and dissolve the congregation in _____, _____ (insert city and state) on _____ (date).

After extensive and prayerful deliberation, we are saddened to cast our votes for dissolution and discontinuance. The changing context of our ministry and the diminished human and financial resources available to us make it extremely difficult to conduct a sustainable ministry in this location. We give thanks to God for the faithful ministry that has been carried out in this place. We pray that God will continue to renew the church here and always.

In order to responsibly carry out this decision, we direct our Congregation Council to work in partnership with the (insert synod) and its bishop to:

- Identify a date for a closing worship service and celebration of ministry
- Provide pastoral care and leadership for our members during this time of special need and transition to new venues for ministry and membership
- Oversee the affairs of the congregation and the orderly disposition of property and assets according to the congregation's legacy plan. The legacy plan must be in place prior to the vote to discontinue ministry.
- The legacy plan directs the mission assets of the congregation in a fashion that will honor the heritage of the saints who have gone before us, prosper the church, and advance the kingdom of God. The title to undisposed property passes to _____ (insert synod) pursuant to the congregation's constitution.

Attested: _____ Congregation Council president

_____ Congregation secretary

Date: _____

APPENDIX II

Congregational closing

Steps in the dissolution of a congregation

Review and implement the following steps to dissolve a congregation.

The Plan

1. Schedule a consultation between the congregation and the synod to collaboratively develop a written plan for the dissolution process. During the entire process, the congregation and synod should consult regularly and the synod should be available to assist with this process.
2. Consult with legal counsel to ensure all necessary legal provisions are followed in relation to the plan of dissolution of a church corporation.
3. As part of the plan, provide for the pastoral care of the members of the closing congregation, and for the transfer of their membership to other congregations.
4. As part of the plan, determine the future of the building(s):
 - a. Will the building(s) be sold to a third party, transferred to the synod, destroyed, moved, or otherwise disposed of?
 - b. Ensure that insurance coverage (fire, windstorm, theft, vandalism) will be maintained until disposition of the property, and identify who will maintain it.
 - c. Ensure that the building is being maintained until its disposition, and identify who will maintain it.
 - d. If the building is to be sold, identify who is responsible for selling it, e.g., will the congregation sell it before dissolution, or will the building be transferred to the synod for sale?
 - e. If the building is to be destroyed or moved, identify a specific date by which the building will be destroyed or moved, and identify who will pay for same.
 - f. What will be done with the building's furnishings and other congregation personal property?
5. *Optional:* As part of the plan, determine what will be done with the assets of the congregation (including the building or proceeds from its sale) after payment of debts and liabilities:
 - a. Will the assets be transferred to the synod?
 - b. Will they be designated for specific uses or charities (whether inside or outside the synod)?
 - c. Or some combination of a. and b.?
 - d. Note: In determining disposition of congregation property, take note of any restricted gifts or assets. Some property may revert to donors or donors' heirs or another charity. Consultation with donors may be necessary.
 - e. Note: Upon dissolution, any remaining assets of the congregation can only be transferred to 501(c)(3) religious, educational, or charitable organizations, or governmental entities. The assets cannot be given to individuals or non-charitable organizations.
 - f. Note: Absent a specific plan, the remaining assets of the congregation, after payment of debts and liabilities, will pass to the synod.
6. *If necessary:* As part of the plan, provide for the care and upkeep of the cemetery, including determination of clear title of land involved, completion of any corporate details, selection of directors, and disposition of any excess land.

7. Consider any additional matters related to special circumstances in the dissolution of a particular congregation, such as a congregation that was part of a multi-point parish.
8. Plan special service of celebration and thanksgiving for the years of ministry of the congregation.

The Meeting

(Again, consult with legal counsel to ensure that the proper steps are followed and that the resolution of dissolution contains the necessary requirements in accordance with state law and the congregation's constitution.)

9. Convene a meeting of the congregation, properly called in accordance with the requirements for such a meeting, as specified in the congregation's constitution and in the state corporation statute, for the purpose of dissolving the congregation.
10. Adopt a resolution to dissolve, which shall be approved by the required majority of voting members present at the meeting of the congregation called for that purpose.
 - a. Make sure that a quorum is present under the congregation's constitution.
 - b. Consult state law as to the appropriate vote required to dissolve, e.g., simple majority, two-thirds, etc.
11. The resolution to dissolve shall include:
 - a. the stated effective date of the dissolution;
 - b. provision for payment of debts and liabilities;
 - c. authorization to the appropriate officers to carry out the proper transfer of title or disposition of the real and personal property; and
 - d. provision for dissolution of the corporation.

After the Meeting

12. Gather and transfer historical information, insurance documents, financial records, legal materials, parochial records, and other appropriate congregation records to the synod or appropriate archives for the archival record of disbanded congregations. See the checklist on page 10.
13. Conduct special service of celebration and thanksgiving for the years of ministry of the congregation.
14. Carry out promptly, before the effective date of dissolution of the congregation, payment of all debts and liabilities of the congregation. Note: this includes addressing any outstanding service contracts or leases.
15. Carry out promptly before the effective date of dissolution of the congregation:
 - a. the transfer of title to real estate to the appropriate successor in title (such as the synod);
 - b. transfer of title or ownership of furnishing or other personal property of the congregation;
 - c. transfer or closure (as appropriate) of all bank accounts, trusts, endowments, or other assets to the appropriate recipients (such as the synod); and
 - d. change mailing address and give neighbors and police information on a contact name if building is still owned but not occupied.
16. Upon completion of the above tasks, file the necessary documents with government authorities to dissolve the corporate status of the congregation.
17. Formally notify the synod that all these steps have been properly completed and provide documentation of same.
18. The synod office officially notifies the secretary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America of the date of dissolution of the congregation.

Checklist

Provide the synod with copies of pertinent legal documents and other critical information including:

- Names, addresses, telephone and email contact information for all officers and council members.
- Copies of all resolutions related to the dissolution of the congregation.
- Provide tax ID number and incorporation papers.
- Copy of end-of-call documents filed with Portico Benefit Services.
- List all cash assets (cash, checking, savings and time deposit accounts) including bank and account number.
- List all investment accounts (bonds, stocks, etc.).
- List all designated and restricted funds and assets along with restrictions.
- List and provide copies of all loans or legal obligations/agreements.
- All tenants and lessees should be listed with copies of contracts and contact people.
- Itemize any monies owed the pastor and other employees with copies of contracts/agreements agreed upon by the congregation. Have any verbal agreements made into written agreements.
- Complete and provide copies of all tax related forms such as W-2s for employees, etc.
- List contracts and service providers with copies of contracts and agreements, i.e. cleaning service, photocopier service.
- List occasional service providers: piano tuner, sound system, heat/air, fire extinguisher, plumbing, etc.
- Inform the synod of phone service/directory listing agreements.
- List all credit cards and account numbers and balances.
- Insurance contracts and agents including type of insurance, coverage, fees and renewal date and copies of all former insurance policies.
- Copies of property tax exemption filings.
- Copies of permits (fire, use, etc., – varies by municipality).
- Copies of easements or other reciprocal arrangements with neighbors.
- Copies of deeds, titles and surveys.
- Make an inventory listing items and fixtures in the church property. Secure, sell, donate or discard materials as appropriate. Work with the synod and convey pertinent information specifically related to memorial gifts.
- Change mailing addresses and give neighbors and police information on a contact name.
- Complete the sale of property and liquidation of all assets. Distribute the mission assets of the congregation in accordance with the legacy proposal. Provide the synod with copies of distribution letters and checks.

Consult regularly with your synod bishop and formally notify the office that all these steps have been properly completed.

APPENDIX III

Legacy planning workshop

A legacy planning workshop is an exercise in stewardship. Three principle tasks are achieved in this process:

1. Defining and interpreting the conditions and opportunities for mission and ministry through and beyond the life of the congregation.
2. Shaping a plan for the care of the congregation members during the time leading to the ending of the congregational ministry and beyond.
3. Crafting a statement of the congregation's historic goals and aspirations as well as the identification of a plan for allocation of mission resources after the dispersal of the congregation.

The legacy workshop takes the form of a congregational retreat and involves voting members of the congregation and representatives from the synod.

The following is a suggested outline for conducting a legacy workshop:

10:00 Start with devotions and prayer

- Share the reason for the meeting and parameters surrounding the legacy decisions
- Provide for pastoral care of members
- Testimony to the impact of this congregation
- Review of the history of the congregation
- Compilation of historic themes, characteristics and passions for ministry

11:30 Lunch

12:00 Becoming a legacy congregation

- Establish legacy directives
- Writing and revision of a legacy statement
- Plan for the management and disbursement of legacy assets

1:30 Close with sharing and prayer

APPENDIX IV

Worship when closing a congregation

Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Service of Leave-Taking
(Leaving a church building or closing a congregation)

INTRODUCTION

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

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

GATHERING

Address

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

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

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

WORD

Thanksgiving for the Means of Grace

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

At the dedication of a church building, it is customary to ask God's blessing on the places of the word and sacraments. Today we return to these symbols of God's grace in our lives. Because proclaiming the word and celebrating the sacraments are the heart of a congregation's ministry, we give thanks for the ways that God has nurtured this congregation throughout the years and has led us to serve others in Christ's name.

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

At the place of the word

Let us pray.

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

Amen.

At the place of baptism

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

Amen.

At the place of the meal

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

Amen.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

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

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

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

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

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

For the work of mission this congregation has supported
[here specific names of global partners and ministries may be mentioned],
for our local partners of ministry
[here names of area ecumenical organizations and local mission efforts may be mentioned],
and for all the lives that have been affected by God's work through us.

For this building that has sheltered *[name of congregation]* for *[number of]* years,
that the memory of this place will continue to inspire devotion to the God
who makes all things possible.

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

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

For a congregation that is merging

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

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

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

MEAL PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

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

As we leave this place that has been a home for worship and mission, help us to gather in our *[new setting / other settings]* that will provide further opportunities for our life and ministry.

Welcome us forever into your embrace, until that day when all your people throughout the world worship together around the throne of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

SENDING CONGREGATIONAL RECORDS AND ASSETS

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

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

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

DECLARATION ON LEAVE-TAKING

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

At the leaving of a building

With thanks to God for the work accomplished in this place, I declare this building to be vacated for the purposes of *[name of congregation]*, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

May the witness of the people who have ministered here in the name of Jesus Christ continue to live on as they leave these walls and begin life in a new place.

Amen.

At the closing of a congregation

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

May the witness of the people

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

Amen.

BLESS

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

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,
in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him
who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Almighty God,

Father, + Son, and Holy Spirit,

bless you now and forever.

Amen.

DISMISSAL

The assisting minister sends the assembly into mission.

Let us go forth in peace,

in the name of Christ. Amen.

PROCESSION

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

NOTES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If the congregation will be taking the items a short distance to a place that it will occupy next (either to a new building or to the facility of another congregation with which it is merging) the procession may continue directly into the other building. If the congregation is closing and is giving all of its property to other entities, including worship appointments, these items may be carried in procession by people who are assuming custody of them, such as representatives of another congregation, a regional church archives center, or an appropriate museum.

Instructions about how the items are to be handled and where they are to be placed at the conclusion of the procession should be provided to participants ahead of time. Information about where the items are going should also be conveyed to the assembly.

PROPER S

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

Prayer of the Day

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

Gospel Acclamation

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

Readings and Psalms

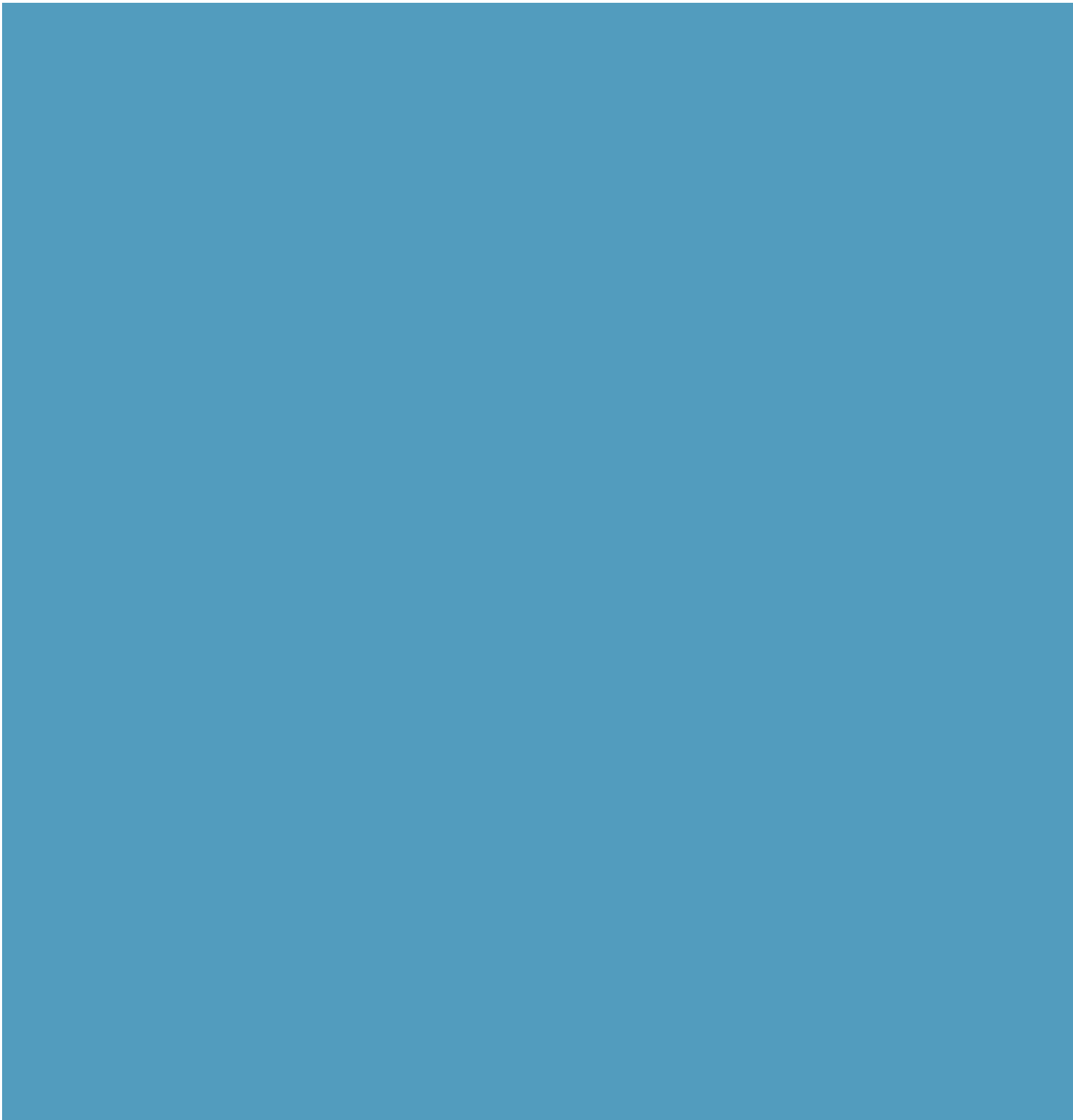
2 Samuel 7:18-29	<i>The house of Israel</i>
Isaiah 43:1-7	<i>The Lord is with Israel</i>
Isaiah 66:1-2	<i>Heaven is the throne and earth is the footstool of God</i>
Jeremiah 29:1-7	<i>Israel plants gardens in Babylon</i>
Psalms 46	<i>The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge</i>

Psalm 90:12-17	<i>So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart</i>
Psalm 103:1-8, 22	<i>The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love</i>
Psalm 122	<i>I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord"</i>
Psalm 136:1-4, 23-26	<i>God's mercy endures forever</i>
Acts 17:22-31	<i>God does not live in human shrines</i>
Ephesians 2:11-22	<i>No longer strangers and aliens, but members of God's household</i>
1 Peter 2:4-10	<i>A living stone, chosen and precious</i>
Revelation 21:1-4, 22-27	<i>The temple is the Lamb</i>
Matthew 6:25-34	<i>Do not worry about tomorrow</i>
Matthew 16:13-20	<i>On this rock I will build my church</i>
Mark 10:23-31	<i>How hard it is for the wealthy to enter God's kingdom</i>
Luke 9:57-62	<i>Jesus says, "Follow me"</i>
John 15:1-11	<i>Christ the vine</i>

Hymns

308	O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright!
429	In Our Day of Thanksgiving
441	Oh, Happy Day When We Shall Stand
503-505	A Mighty Fortress Is Our God
524	What Is This Place
526	God Is Here!
579	Lord, You Give the Great Commission
596, 597	My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less
627	O Day Full of Grace
632	O God, Our Help in Ages Past
633	We've Come This Far by Faith
639	When We Are Living
645	Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation
647	Glorious Things of You Are Spoken
652	Built on a Rock
654	The Church's One Foundation
656	Blest Be the Tie That Binds
729	The Church of Christ, in Every Age
839, 840	Now Thank We All Our God
858, 859	Praise to the Lord, the Almighty

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

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