



Sierra Pacific Synod  
committed to being re-formed

[www.spselca.org](http://www.spselca.org)

## When your Pastor Leaves

### Sierra Pacific Synod

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## **Concluding the partnership with your current Pastor**

There are many reasons for a pastor to leave a congregation: retirement, another call, or personal reasons. No matter the reason, there will be a period of adjustment for the congregation. Some members of the congregation might feel sad, abandoned, or betrayed, while others might feel relief or even joy at a pastor's departure. From all places on the emotional spectrum, there will be some who want to move ahead quickly, often ignoring the emotional work that is critical in transition time. Congregation members must be allowed to process their feelings in order to prepare for the next pastor. Processing emotions takes time and should not be minimized. Transitions are an opportunity to develop new ways of being that offer revitalization. Saying good-bye well can pave the way for a healthy new relationship later on.

Congregations are not alone during these times of transition. The Office of the Bishop is always in partnership with congregations and pastors and deacons, and will walk even more closely with congregations during pastoral transitions. As one minister is leaving and the congregation prepares to welcome a new minister into the future ministry, the Office of the Bishop offers specific and constitutionally-mandated recommendations for congregations. The relationship among the Office of the Bishop, the congregation, and the pastor is a partnership where each one holds the other accountable to be who God is creating us to be: the body of Christ.

### **A Checklist for farewell**

- ✓ The pastor informs the congregation council and the Office of the Bishop of their departure in writing
- ✓ The congregation council accepts the pastor's resignation in their meeting minutes
- ✓ The pastor and congregation council inform the congregation of their departure.
- ✓ The congregation plans farewell event(s)
- ✓ The pastor and congregation council have an exit interview
- ✓ The pastor and officers complete all obligations to one another
- ✓ The pastor and officer submit the Attestation of Record and Financial Requirements
- ✓ The pastor and congregation submit a Covenant of Departure
- ✓ The congregation council begins meeting with the Office of the Bishop to consult on interim ministry

### **The Pastor Resigns**

When the pastor resigns it may happen as an in-person conversation, a council agenda item, or a letter. There are a variety of ways to say goodbye and yet, at some point it is necessary to mark the change in role and relationship in writing.

The pastor should inform the congregation council and the Office of Bishop of their resignation in writing. The letter of resignation should include a date of departure, words of farewell, and hopes for how to say farewell in the remaining days.

In turn, when a pastor resigns, the congregation council should receive the letter of resignation at a meeting of the council. The date of departure should also be reflected in the minutes of the council meeting.

The pastor should then inform the congregation of their resignation in at least two formats. For example, the pastor can write a letter to be mailed to all the members of the congregation and make an announcement in weekly worship. We encourage the pastor to work with the congregation council in the planning of this announcement so that in the following weeks and days they may also be able to communicate the acceptance of the pastor's resignation, any farewell plans, expressions of gratitude, and next stages in the congregation's life.

When a pastor resigns from their call, their role with the people of the congregation changes. This is never easy and it is essential to allow enough time for as many people as possible to make this transition in ways that honor any of the accompanying feelings. We recommend that the date of departure be approximately 30 days from the pastor's resignation. The timeline should consider the festivals of the liturgical year, rhythms of the congregation, and needs of the pastor.

## **A Good Farewell**

Because a resignation signals the end of an important covenantal relationship, it is common for congregation members to experience feelings of grief, sadness, anger, anxiety, etc. In order to help the congregation move through this experience, a farewell event (or events) for the exiting pastor (and their family if applicable) should be planned. This can take several forms. Some suggestions are:

- A seated dinner or informal potluck dinner
- A farewell gift
- A collection of cards or written farewells
- Organized small-group or one-on-one meetings
- A shared act of service
- A reception after worship
- A worship service of farewell.

A special committee may be appointed to plan the event(s) and coordinate all the congregational expressions of appreciation. This may also be done by members of the council or volunteer leadership. While employed staff may help, it is not appropriate to ask them to lead the planning.

On the next page is a Thanksgiving at the Conclusion of a Call. We highly recommend incorporating this rite into worship on the pastor's last Sunday in your congregation. It may also be a good idea to invite the Bishop or a member of their staff to join you for this worship service.

# Thanksgiving at the Conclusion of a Call

*The order follows the post-communion canticle (or prayer if no canticle is sung)*

## Address

*A representative of the congregation addresses the pastor whose call is concluding*

### A pastor

L: Name, on date we of Congregation Name called you to be pastor in this place: to proclaim

God's word, to baptize and teach, to announce God's forgiveness, and to preside at the Lord's table. With the gospel you have comforted us in times of sickness and trouble, and at the death of our loved ones. Sharing our joys and sorrows, you [and your family] have been important to our life together in the church of Jesus Christ, in our service to this community, and in God's mission to the whole world. As you leave this community of faith, we say farewell, and we pray for God's blessing.

### Prayer

L: Let us pray for the saving presence of our living God:

In your world, **be present God.**

In this congregation, **be present God.**

In this community, **be present God.**

In this synod, and the whole church, **be present God.**

In the homes and hearts of all your people, **be present God.**

L: Let us pray for the mercy of God:

For work begun but not completed, **God have mercy.**

For expectations not met, **God have mercy.**

For wounds not healed, **God have mercy.**

For gifts not shared, **God have mercy.**

For promises not kept, **God have mercy.**

L: Let us give thanks for our journey together in this place:

For friendships made, for joys celebrated

and for times of nurture and growth, **thanks be to God.**

For wounds healed, expectations met,

gifts given and promises kept, **thanks be to God.**

For our fellowship in Jesus Christ,

and for the love of God which has sustained us, **thanks be to God.**

## Dissolution

L: People of God, members of Name of Congregation, do you release Name from service as our pastor / deacon

**We do, and we give thanks to God for our ministry together.**

*The leader addresses the person whose call is concluding.*

L: Name, do you recognize and accept the completion of your ministry with Name of Congregation ?

*I do, and I give thanks to God for our ministry together.*

## Thanksgiving and Sending

L: Let us pray....Almighty God, through Jesus Christ you gave the holy apostles many gifts and commanded them to feed your flock. You equip your people with abilities that differ according to the grace given to them, and you call them to various avenues of service. We give you thanks for the ministry of Name among the people of God in this place.

You watch over our going out and our coming in:

**bless this time of ending and beginning.**

You surround your people in every time and place:

**keep us close in your love.**

You accompany your people in times of joy and times of trial:

**prosper all that has been done to your glory in this time together;**

**heal and forgive all that has fallen short of your will for us.**

**Help Name [and her/his/their family] and all of us, to live with courage and gladness in the future you give to us.**

L: As *he/she/they* has been a blessing to us, so now send *him/her/them* forth to be a blessing to others; through Jesus Christ, our Savior. **Amen.**

*The service continues with the benediction*

*When a representative of the synod leads this order, that person may address the person whose call is concluding, and the assembly, with these or similar words. This address may precede the benediction:*

L: Your siblings in Christ of the Sierra Pacific Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America give thanks to God for the ministry you have shared. We promise you our continued support and prayer. rejoicing in the blessings of God in Name of Congregation and in the ministry of Name,  
With hope in God's abundant grace in years to come,  
I announce that Name's service as position in Name of Congregation is now concluded.

## Completion of Obligations

As the congregation celebrates the ministry of the pastor and tends to the personal relationships between the members and their pastor, the council turns its attention to the covenant relationship that the congregation made with their pastor when they arrived.

To learn from one another about the partnership that you have shared over the past years, the congregation president should schedule an exit interview with the departing pastor. The exit interview will usually be with the exiting pastor and church council or executive committee. An exit interview is an intentional conversation whose purposes are:

To evaluate the ministry;

To identify areas of potential growth for the pastor and the congregation;

To celebrate the ministry;

To articulate appropriate boundaries and establish a covenant of behavior between the pastor and the congregation for the future health and well-being of the congregation and the pastor.

### Exit Interview – Sample Questions the Executive Committee might ask:

1. What would you say was the most satisfying part of your ministry?
2. What would be some of the most frustrating parts of your ministry here? What would make those areas less frustrating for the next pastor?
3. Are there any organizational or structural issues that you see could be improved? Do you have any recommendations in that regard?
4. What strengths or special talents do you see in this congregation? Do you have recommendations on how we might use or continue to use those gifts to the best advantage in the future?
5. What opportunities for ministry do you see in this community that we as a congregation might address in the future?
6. What was your assessment of this congregation when you first came? How has that assessment changed during your time here?
7. If you had a chance to start your ministry over again in this congregation, what might you do differently?
8. What have been the areas of growth in this congregation during your ministry here with us?
9. What would you like to see us doing five years from now? What unfulfilled goals of yours would you like to see carried forward?
10. What did we not ask you that we should have asked?
11. What has been your relationship with the leadership of the congregation? How might lay leaders be more effective in leading the congregation?
12. How can we be helpful to you in your leaving?

## Exit Interview - Sample Questions the Pastor might ask:

1. What were your visions and hopes when you called me to minister with you here? How are they different now?
2. What did you see as my greatest contribution to your ministry here?
3. What do you think were the highlights of our ministry together?
4. If we had an imaginary chance to do this ministry together again, what might we do differently?
5. How has the congregation grown/changed in our time together?
6. Are there any unfinished matters that we should discuss before I leave?

The officers of the congregation and the pastor should also complete all obligations of their covenant partnership with one another and the wider church as represented in the synod and denomination.

Portico Benefits: The president and treasurer ensure that an End of Call form is completed in order to cease billing from Portico. The document can be found at [www.porticobenefits.org](http://www.porticobenefits.org). The congregation is responsible for the pension and benefits until this document is completed. The exiting pastor must complete a Change of Call form to inform Portico where to mail upcoming invoices.

Parsonage: If there is a parsonage, consider scheduling a walk-through with the current pastor to plan for the resolution of any issues identified in the walk-through.

Future correspondence: Obtain a forwarding address, phone number, and e-mail address to forward any mail that the pastor may receive and to mail anything that is not completed by the time of departure. It is helpful if this information is communicated to the Office of the Bishop as well.

Attestation of Record and Financial Requirements: Before the pastor's departure, the secretary of the congregation council will meet with the departing pastor to review and receive parochial reports. The parochial reports of each congregation should be kept in accordance with the Records Management of the ELCA (found at <https://elca.org/Resources/Office-of-the-Secretary>) and the and will remain the property of the congregation. The treasurer of the council will meet with the departing pastor to review and settle all financial obligations to the congregation. The president, secretary, and treasurer of the council and the pastor will sign the Attestation of Record and Financial Requirements and submit a copy of the attestation to the Office of the Bishop of the Sierra Pacific Synod before the pastor's last day of service in the congregation.

A congregation under financial obligation to its departing pastor must make satisfactory settlement of the obligation before calling another pastor. Such financial obligations may include loans on housing, grants, vacation pay, educational loan forgiveness, etc. The congregation president and treasurer, and the pastor shall attest to satisfactory settlement in the Attestation of Record and Financial Requirement documents.

Transfer of work and materials: All materials that was acquired and intellectual property that was created during the partnership of ministry are the property of the congregation unless otherwise stated at the time of purchase or creation. Books, curriculum, worship liturgies, and other work that may be managed by the pastor should be transferred to the care of the congregation. Additionally, the council and pastor should take care that all administrative processes and responsibilities of ministries be transferred to the appropriate persons of the congregation for caretaking in the coming season of transition.

## **Covenant for a new Relationship**

A healthy relationship between a pastor and God's people is often mutually enriching and joyous. While serving a congregation, a pastor is deeply involved in the lives of God's people, and it is appropriate that strong bonds of trust, friendship, commitment and interdependence develop.

However, when the Holy Spirit leads the pastor away from a congregation, those relationships, however strong, must change for the future health of both the congregation and the pastor. For the congregation to move forward, its members need to accept fully the authority and guidance of succeeding pastors, both interim and called, even as they cherish the memory and leadership of the former pastor. For former pastors to live into their new lives of service or retirement, they need to surrender pastoral authority and sever pastoral ties with their former congregations and their people.

Upon the effective date of their resignation, the pastor's responsibilities and rights in your congregation come to an end and it is no longer appropriate for them to perform the functions of the pastoral office in your congregation. Care must be taken to communicate this change in role and relationships as it is often very difficult for congregation and pastor alike.

One way that we care for one another in this change is to covenant together in a new relationship. The following pages contain a covenant of departure that should be completed by the pastor and the congregation. A copy of this covenant should be given to the Office of the Bishop of the Sierra Pacific Synod.

*“A complete relationship needs a covenant . . . A covenantal relationship rests on a shared commitment to ideas, to issues , to values to goals, and to management processes . . . Covenantal relationships reflect unity and grace and poise. They are expressions of the sacred nature of relationships.”*

*from the 5th Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization written by Peter M. Senge. Senge is quoting from a book called The Art of Leadership written by M. dePree in 1989.*



## **Communication as Care for the Congregation**

Change always brings anxiety and in times of anxiousness there is no such thing as over-communication. It will be most loving and helpful if the congregation council will take care to communicate this covenant and the new appropriate relationship with their former pastor. Here we provide you with a sample newsletter article that you may want to use.

Additionally, it will be an act of care to communicate more frequently with the congregation than usual. Some suggestions for what to share with the congregation in the coming months are:

- what is on the council's agenda this month
- who can answer questions and needs about pastoral care when pastor is gone
- expected behavior with the former pastor (see sample article on next page)
- who will be leading worship (this) Sunday
- who is the council working with to find us a new pastor
- how can congregation members help in the time between pastors/deacons
- updates of what is being done in the process of transition

We suggest that the leaders of the congregation share this information in multiple formats (spoken, written, individually, corporately, etc.) and repeatedly.

### **Sample Newsletter Article**

As we say goodbye to Pastor \_\_\_\_\_ and celebrate their ministry with us, we know that many of us are grieving the end of our relationship with (him/her/them). The nature of the relationship between pastor and people often gets translated as the pastor being a friend. The reality is that while pastor may have indeed been very friendly, the relationship is not one of friendship.

The council wants to prepare you for how our relationship with our pastor will change and seek your support for the hopeful future of both our congregation and our pastor as our ministries diverge.

We commit to do everything possible to uphold the mission of the Church and the covenant relationship we hold with the Sierra Pacific Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

We recognize the need for time to adjust to new relationships and will reach out in care and compassion to one another.

We will honor the departure of our pastor by not asking or inviting them to perform pastoral duties such as funerals, weddings, worship, or pastoral care.

While we recognize that we will continue to care about the departing pastor and family, we will not expect nor invite the pastor to participate in congregational life, with the possible exception of special congregational anniversaries or observations.

**Attestation of Record and Financial Requirements**  
*To be filed with the congregation secretary and the synod bishop*

The official records of this congregation have been updated on \_\_\_\_\_ and accurately reflect the membership, baptisms, funerals, and weddings performed in this congregation. The most recent parochial report was filed on \_\_\_\_\_, a copy of which is attached to this document. The official records have been transferred to the secretary of the congregation.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Pastor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Secretary of Congregation

The pastor has made satisfactory settlement of all financial obligations to this congregation and to individual members of this congregation. Any payment plans shall be attached to this document.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Pastor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Treasurer of Congregation

\_\_\_\_\_  
President of Congregation

The congregation has made satisfactory settlement of all financial obligations to this pastor and their family. Any payment plans shall be attached to this document.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Pastor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Treasurer of Congregation

\_\_\_\_\_  
President of Congregation

## A Covenant of Departure

This covenant is an agreement between The Rev. \_\_\_\_\_  
and the people of \_\_\_\_\_  
in \_\_\_\_\_ effective as of the pastor's  
date of departure on \_\_\_\_\_. It is a clarification of the  
pastor's role in relationship to this congregation upon their departure.

The congregation and its members promise:

We will not reach out to the former pastor for pastoral care in times of emotional, spiritual, or physical need, but rather will rely exclusively on our current pastor .

We will not invite or approach the former pastor to perform or participate in pastoral acts, such as weddings, funerals, baptisms, home communions, etc., but rather exclusively the current pastor.

Will not seek the counsel of the former pastor (or their family members) on matters relating to the congregation, including its worship life, finance, administration, leadership, or issues.

We will not expect nor will we invite the former pastor (or their family members) to retain membership in the church, to attend worship, or to participate in activities or events in the life of the congregation.

We will speak positively of the former pastor (and their family members). As Martin Luther explains in the Small Catechism, the Eighth Commandment compels us to do so: "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defense, speak well of them and interpret everything they do in the best possible light."

We will regard former pastors as siblings in Christ and we agree that any future friendship with our former pastor will begin only after a period of one year or greater has passed. We do this out of care and respect for our congregation's need of time and space to form relationships of trust with our future interim and called pastors.

The pastor promises to:

Politely but firmly refuse requests to provide pastoral care for former congregational members, instead referring them to the current pastor. For the health of the congregation and the integrity of the ministry of the current pastor, this rule will be without exception.

Politely but firmly refuse all request to perform or participate in pastoral acts, such as weddings, funerals, baptisms, home communions, etc., instead referring them to the current pastor. (Former pastors will respond to all such requests with an unequivocal "no" and not suggest that members ask the current pastor if it's okay as such a requests put the current pastor in an unjust position, creates unhealthy relationships, and undermines the trust of the congregation.)

Decline to comment on matters relating to the former congregation, including worship life, finance, administration, interpersonal relationships, conflicts, or politics. Former pastors will counsel their family members similarly to decline commenting or conversing about the congregation.

Not hold membership in this congregation at any time after the departure date of this covenant for themselves or their family members. Nor will they or their family members attend worship or participate in the regular events or activities of the congregation except for anniversary celebrations of the congregation.

Speak well of the congregation, its leaders, and its members. As Martin Luther explains in the *Small Catechism* the eighth commandment instructs us to do so.

Regard congregation members as siblings in Christ only from this point forward and agree that any future friendships or relationships other than pastor and member will begin only after a period of one year or greater has passed. In future relationships the pastor agrees to always take responsibility for reminding the other person that the pastor is no longer *their* pastor.

In order to promote a healthy closure to the ministry tenure of our departing pastor and a healthy beginning to the tenure of successor pastors; and for the benefit of our congregation and the community in which it serves, as well as in care for the future ministry of our departing pastor and their personal wellbeing, we the undersigned agree to abide by the conditions of this covenant to the best of our ability. We will encourage others in our congregation and our families to do the same by making this covenant a public and living document.

Congregation Council President

Congregation Council Vice President

Pastor

Date