

When A Pastor or Rostered Leader Resigns or Retires

When a pastor leaves either because of a retirement or resignation, it can be a stressful and anxious time for the community. While it may be an exciting time for the pastor leader to begin a new chapter in their lives, there can be surprise, confusion, sadness, and even anger for members of a congregation upon hearing the news that their pastor is leaving. The following steps are designed help both the pastor and the congregation move through this process and experience closure. Many of the following steps also apply if the rostered leader is an associate in ministry or diaconal minister.

1. The first step is for the pastor leader to inform the synod office of their retirement or resignation from a call.
2. The pastor then submits a letter of resignation to the council and informs the congregation. The letter of resignation should include the ending date of the call. As a general rule it is recommended that the pastor's last day be about 30 days after submitting their letter of resignation. While it is important to have time to say goodbye and have closure, it can be difficult on everyone to prolong this process.
3. The congregation needs to contact Portico (855-658-4637) to provide ending of call information. If the pastor is not accepting another call immediately, he or she also needs to contact Portico to make arrangements for on-going health care coverage. If the pastor is not accepting another call immediately, she or he must request "on leave from call" status from the synod council.
4. A representative from the synod meets with the pastor and the Congregation Council to:
 - Do an exit interview with the pastor
 - Encourage the congregation to also conduct an exit interview with the pastor
 - Review and sign a *Covenant for Departing Pastors* and give a copy *Pastoral Ethics: Pastors Relating to Previously Served Parishes* or *Pastoral Ethics: For Pastors Retiring to a Community Where They Have Served*
 - Review forms: *Certification of Completion of Financial Obligations* and *Certification of Church Records* which must be signed before the pastor leaves
 - Talk about the needs of the congregation for interim ministry
 - Celebrate a *Thanksgiving at the Conclusion of a Call* which can be done with a representative of the synod office or at a later time during a worship service or congregational celebration
5. Plan a farewell celebration for the pastor.

6. The Congregation Council works with the synod office to arrange transitional ministry support.

- The council arranges for pulpit supply and pastoral care coverage until an interim pastor can begin.
- The synod office will identify potential interim pastors.
- The council interviews the potential interim pastor to determine the purposes, duties, and mutual expectations (including compensation) for this ministry.
- The council president, secretary, interim pastor, and bishop or bishop's representative sign a Covenant Agreement.

Western Iowa Synod, ELCA

Certification of Completion of Financial Obligations

Upon the resignation of a pastor, the following policy of the Western Iowa Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America applies:

S14.16. The pastor shall make satisfactory settlement of all financial obligations to a former congregation before:

- a. installation in another field of labor, or
- b. the issuance of a certificate of dismissal or transfer

***C9.08.** This congregation shall make satisfactory settlement of all financial obligations to a former pastor before calling a successor. A pastor shall make satisfactory settlement of all financial obligations to this congregation before beginning service in a call to another congregation or employment in another ministry setting related to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Date: _____

This is to certify:

1. That all financial obligations, salary, pension, health benefits and allowances, together with continuing education funds have been met and paid by _____ Lutheran Church to _____ up to the effective date of the end of the call.

2. That satisfactory settlement of all financial obligations have been made by _____ to _____ Lutheran Church, located in _____.

Signed:

Treasurer of the Congregation

Pastor

This form should be completed before the pastor leaves. Please return to:
Western Iowa Synod, ELCA
318 E 5th St
Storm Lake, IA 50588

Western Iowa Synod, ELCA

Certification of Church Records

Upon the resignation of a pastor, the following policy of the Western Iowa Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America applies:

- S14.15** The parochial records of all baptisms, confirmations, marriages, burials, communicants, members received, members transferred or dismissed, members who have become inactive or members excluded from the congregation shall be kept accurately and permanently. They shall remain the property of the congregation. . . . The secretary of the congregation shall attest to the bishop of this synod that such records have been placed in his or her hands in good order by a departing pastor before:
- a. installation in another field of labor, or
 - b. the issuance of a certificate of dismissal or transfer.

Before the pastor leaves, he or she should meet with the secretary of the congregation to examine the church records. Upon finding the church records in good order, the secretary of the congregation shall complete the form below and forward it to the synod bishop.

Date: _____

This is to certificated that I have examined the parochial records of _____

Lutheran Church located in _____ and find them in good order.

Signed:

Print Name:

Address: _____

Phone: _____

e-mail: _____

Please return to:

Western Iowa Synod, ELCA
318 E 5th St
Storm Lake, IA 50588

Covenant for Departing Pastors

It has been my privilege to serve the mission and ministry of _____ Church as Pastor during these past _____ months/years. As God called me for a time to serve among you, God now calls me forth to serve in a new way, in a new place among a new people though still one in the body of Christ. (or in the case of retirement: While God called me for a time to serve among you, it is now time for me to retire.)

Aware of the policies and expectations of Western Iowa Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, I enter into the following covenant. I agree:

- To pray for the ongoing mission of the congregation and for their new pastor;
- To communicate to the congregation, in writing and in conversation, the terms of this covenant which terminates this pastoral relationship;
- To not be involved in any leadership or advisory role (public or private) in this congregation and to refrain from behaviors that seek in any way to control the transition process, including any attempt to influence the choice of a successor;
- To refrain from language or behavior that could undermine the development of the relationship between the congregation and a new pastor, including the interim pastor;
- To not support or give advice to anyone involved in a congregational disagreement;
- To refuse requests for pastoral services made by members of the congregation, including baptisms, weddings, funerals, anniversaries, visiting the sick and homebound, except when invited by the current pastor;
- To consult with the current pastor regarding my attendance at worship and special events;
- To encourage my family members to support me in maintaining this covenant and to support the ministry of the congregation's new pastor.

Signature of Pastor: _____ *Date:* _____

Signature of President _____ *Date:* _____

(Please return a signed copy of this covenant to the Western Iowa Synod office.)

Letter to Congregation Concerning Covenant for Departing Pastor

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Pastor _____ and the Congregation Council have signed a covenant, which helps us understand our relationship with one another as we move forward without him/her.

When a pastor leaves a congregation or retires, it is not appropriate for him/her to continue to function in the pastoral role. This is difficult and sometimes painful for us to understand. However, if we remember that part of our calling as the people of God is to care for the body of Christ and not injure different members of it, we might find it easier to accept. For instance, if a pastor does a funeral for Jane because she was so special, why won't the pastor perform a baptism for Joe's family? It's easy to see how hurt feelings would not only affect Joe's feelings toward the former pastor but perhaps also feelings within the body of Christ between Jane's family and Joe's family.

It is important for us to understand that as of _____ Pastor _____ is no longer our pastor but she/he will pray for our continued and future mission and ministry and for a strong and fruitful partnership with our future pastoral leader. Therefore Pastor

_____ **cannot:**

- Come back to perform weddings, funerals, or baptisms;
- Visit the sick and the homebound;
- Continue in any counseling relationship with a parishioner;
- Be involved in any way in the call process (helping with the profile, recommending candidates, commenting on a particular candidate);
- Support or give advice to anyone involved in a congregational disagreement ;
- Return to leave worship services (unless down the road he/she is invited back as a "former pastor" to participate in a special event, such as a church anniversary).

We give thanks to God for the time Pastor _____ was with us and we pray for him/her as he/she now goes forth to serve God and the church in new ways. We are working with the synod office to find an interim pastors and eventually enter in the call process for a new pastor. We trust that God will send us a new leader who will be called to serve God and the ministry of this congregation for the next stage of our ministry.

In Christ,

Council President

Thanksgiving at the Conclusion of a Call (1)

(This Thanksgiving can be done by the Bishop or Representative of the Synod office.)

Pastor _____ in _____ you began your call to serve as pastor here at _____ As pastor, you were called here 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 the people of _____ times of sickness and trouble, and at the death of loved ones. Sharing joys and sorrows, you have been important to the life of this community within the church of Jesus Christ, in their service to this community, and in God's mission to the whole world.

On _____ the congregation's call to you comes to an end. As you leave this community of faith and say farewell to one another, we give thanks for your ministry and pray for God's blessing.

PULPIT: You were invited into this pulpit. From this place you have proclaimed the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ countless times throughout these past years. This pulpit has not belonged to you; the saving message of Christ is not something one can possess, but only bear witness to. You have been a faithful occupant of this church's pulpit and messenger of the good news of God's love in Christ. As you leave this pulpit we thank God for your preaching ministry.

Thanks be to God!

FONT: At this font you have presided at the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Through the cleansing waters of baptism we welcome new members into the family of Christ. The gift of new life in Christ belongs to God. The church is the custodian of this rite of welcome, and you have introduced this congregation to many new brothers and sisters in the faith. You have presided as confirmands affirmed their baptismal promises. As you leave this font, we thank you for your ministry surrounding baptismal promises.

Thanks be to God!

ALTAR: At this altar you have presided at the Sacrament of Holy Communion. You have reminded the members here of how Jesus began this meal with his disciples. You have provided instruction to those who would receive it for the first time. The meal is the Lord's, and this congregation has been provider of this meal to all who seek to be fed with the living presence of Christ. You have presided over this meal so that it could be served in an orderly fashion. As you leave this table, we thank you for presiding at the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

Thanks be to God!

CHANCEL STEP: Standing in front of this congregation you have led services of thankfulness to God for people who had died. You led this community in the midst of grief while expressing gratitude for God's gift of life. You proclaimed the Good News of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and encouraged the community with the comfort of the gospel. As you leave this sanctuary, we thank you for your presence in times of loss.

Thanks be to God!

CHANCEL: It is here that you presided at services where couples were married. You were present to rejoice with those who rejoice. Thank you for sharing those and other great times of joy.

Thanks be to God!

People of God, as representatives of the members of _____ and with thanks to God for the ministry of Pastor _____ among you, do you now release him/her from service as your pastor?

We do, and we give thanks to God.

Pastor _____ with thanks to God for the members of this community and for their ministry with you, do you recognize and accept the completion of your ministry with _____
I do, and I give thanks to God.

Let us pray. Almighty God, through your Son Jesus Christ you gave the holy apostles many gifts and commanded them to feed your flock. We give you thanks for the ministry of Pastor _____ 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 Pastor _____ as well as the people of this congregation to live with courage and gladness in the future you give to us. As he/she has been a blessing to this congregation, so now send him/her forth to be a blessing to others; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Rejoicing in the blessings of God in this congregation and in the ministry of Pastor _____, with hope in God's abundant grace in years to come, I announce that this pastoral relationship is ended effective _____.

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord's face shine on you with grace and mercy. The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace. Amen.

Go in peace. Serve the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Thanksgiving at the Conclusion of a Call (2)

(This liturgy is from the ELW Occasional Services for the Assembly.)

Pastor _____ on _____ we called you to be our pastor: to proclaim God's Word, to baptize and teach, to announce God's forgiveness, and to preside at the Lord's Supper. 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 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.)

People of God, members of _____, do you release _____ from service as your pastor?

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

_____, do you recognize and accept the completion of your ministry with _____?
I do and I give thanks to God for our ministry together.

Let us pray. Almighty, God, through your Son 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 _____ 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 _____ and all of us to live with courage and gladness in the future you give to us.

As he/she has been a blessing to us, so now send him/her forth to be a blessing to others; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen

(Pastor whose call has concluded may proclaim God's blessing)

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord's face shine upon you with grace and mercy.

The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace.

Amen

(A sending song may be sung)

Go in peace. Serve the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Western Iowa Synod, ELCA

Pastoral Ethics: Pastors Relating to Previously Served Parishes

When a pastor accepts a call to a congregation, a sacred covenant is established between that pastor and the people of God in that place. In order that the ministry might be strong and effective, it is important for that relationship to be strengthened and nurtured until God calls that pastor to another sector of ministry. When a pastor resigns, that call – that covenant – ends. How does a pastor relate appropriately to members of congregations where one has previously served? We offer the following suggestions, with the hope that it will give guidance so that good choices are made which do not negatively impact the ministry of the people of God.

1. It is your responsibility as a former pastor to decline invitations to conduct pastoral acts in any former parish. It is important that you do not pass the burden of such decisions back to the pastor who currently holds that call. As professional people, we commit ourselves to act responsibly in these matters. For the sake of the church and the ongoing ministry of the congregation, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” When we do that, our relating to members of previous parishes can be used by God to build up the body of Christ.
2. It is your responsibility as a former pastor to be supportive of your successor, even when that is difficult to do. The responsibility for the success of the current pastor is also your responsibility. If it is not possible for you to be supportive of that pastor’s ministry, it is extremely important that you cut off contact with members of that congregation, in order not to become a hindrance to its ministry.
3. While the above statements are addressed to pastors, spouses of pastors must consider the same factors, and also respect the recommendations made above. Spouses share a pastoral identity and, as a result, can become hindrances as easily as a pastor can.

This policy on pastoral ethics is shared for the sake of the Church and the ongoing ministry of the congregation, to enable us to act wisely in difficult circumstances. It is provided to help rostered leaders and congregations understand S14.14 of the Synod Constitution: ***Ordained ministers shall respect the integrity of the ministry of congregations which they do not serve and shall not exercise ministerial functions therein unless invited to do so by the pastor, or if there is no duly called pastor, then by the interim pastor in consultation with the Congregation Council.***

*Adopted by the Western Iowa Synod Council Executive Committee
June 27, 2015*

Western Iowa Synod, ELCA

Pastoral Ethics: For Pastors Retiring to a Community Where They Have Served

When a pastor accepts a call to a congregation, a sacred covenant is established between that pastor and the people of God. In order that the ministry might be strong and effective, it is important for that relationship to be strengthened and nurtured until God calls that pastor to another sector of ministry. When a pastor retires, it is often desired to remain with a community where there has been life and family investment. We offer the following observations and suggestions with the hope that it will give guidance to pastors who are considering retirement, so that good decisions are made which do not negatively impact the ministry of the people of God.

1. Whenever possible, plan your retirement so that you will not be retiring in the parish where you have served as pastor.
2. If you are seriously considering remaining in the same community, please consult with the Bishop before any firm decisions are made.
3. Consider retirement as a “call to the ministry of the baptized.” Retirement does not mean being uninvolved as an active church member; it means to be involved in ministry as we have encouraged members to be involved throughout our ministries. Belonging to the same congregation that you served as pastor may not allow you to function actively, sharing your many gifts and insights, without creating problems for the congregation, which now has a covenant with a new pastor. Therefore, if there is any other ELCA congregation within commuting distance, transfer.
4. If you decide to live where you have served as a pastor, recognize that you may become the focus of difficulty in that setting. Prepare the congregation well before declaring your new relationship to members of the congregation. Visit in depth with the new pastor who has been called to the parish, so the pastor can be assured that your presence will not be a hindrance, and that you will do everything possible to be of support and help. Ongoing communication within the pastorate is absolutely essential. “Do to others as you would want them to do to you” is the guiding principle.”
5. It is your responsibility, as a former pastor, to **decline invitations to conduct pastoral acts in any former parish**. It is important that you say “no,” rather than, “I’ll come if the current pastor says okay.”
6. While the above statements are addressed to pastors, **spouses of pastors** must consider the same factors, and also respect the above recommendations. Spouses

share a pastoral identity and, as a result, can become hindrances as easily as a pastor can.

7. It is your responsibility as a former pastor to be supportive of your successor, even when that is difficult to do. If it is not possible to be supportive of the pastor's ministry, it is extremely important that you remove yourself from that congregation, in order to not become a hindrance to its ministry.

This policy on pastoral ethics is shared for the sake of the Church and the ongoing ministry of the congregation, to enable us to act wisely in difficult circumstances. It is provided to help rostered leaders and congregations understand S14.14 of the Synod Constitution: ***Ordained ministers shall respect the integrity of the ministry of congregations which they do not serve and shall not exercise ministerial functions therein unless invited to do so by the pastor, or if there is no duly called pastor, then by the interim pastor in consultation with the Congregation Council.***

*Adopted by the Western Iowa Synod Council Executive Committee
June 2015*

**Interim Ministry:
A Partnership between the Congregation, the Synod Office, and an interim Pastor
in the time of transition between pastors**

In this fast paced world, we often neglect to take a breath, reflect on the past, celebrate the present, and imagine a new future engaged in God's work. In Scripture, that rich time is often a wilderness time/experience. The interim period between the time when a pastor leaves and a new pastor is called is such a wilderness time as a congregation. The interim period

- takes an intentional look at the past and how God has guided the mission of the community
- allows space for celebration of the present as members examine the gifts of the community
- utilizes intentional conversation and prayer to imagine a new future of mission and ministry
- works directly with the call process to identify gifts needed in the next pastor so the congregation can be faithful and strong.

An interim period can last nine to eighteen months, depending on the needs of the congregation and the work that needs to be done during the interim. Rushing the process can be detrimental in seeking to call a new pastor rather than just attempting to "replace" a former pastor.

Finding an interim pastor

- The synod office will identify potential interim candidates who may be pastors who have been trained as "intentional" interim pastors, pastors who are retired or on leave from call, or Parish Ministry Associates. Different situations call for different skill sets.
- The council of the congregation interviews the potential interim, discusses needs and expectations, and works out a compensation package. The compensation package can be based upon the synod's compensation guidelines as well as the congregation's current budget.
- Once an agreement has been reached, a *Covenant Agreement for an Interim Ministry* is signed by the president and secretary of the congregation, the interim pastor, and a representative of the synod office.

The following is a provision in the Model Constitution for Congregations of the ELCA and pertains to interim pastors.

***C9.07** *During the period of service, an interim pastor shall have the rights and duties in the congregation of a regularly called pastor and may delegate the same in part to a supply pastor with the consent of the bishop of the synod and this congregation or Congregation Council. The interim pastor and any ordained pastor providing assistance shall refrain from exerting influence in the selection of a pastor. Unless previously agreed upon by the Synod Council, an interim pastor is not available for a regular call to the congregation served.*

Liturgy of Beginning for an Interim Ministry

L: In Holy Baptism we are called by the promise of God into a relationship of faith toward God and love toward one another. This relationship finds expression in our gathering as congregations of the church to hear God's Word, eat and drink at the Lord's Table, and minister to the needs of our community and God's world. As Lutheran congregations, we call pastors to leave and assist us in our ministry; to teach, challenge, and admonish us according to the gospel; to counsel, comfort, and guide us in the love of God; and to oversee the events and activities of our common life. The interim period between a former pastor's leaving and a new pastor's coming affords us an opportunity to reflect on our past, evaluate our present, and dream toward our future as God's people.

L: In partnership with the Western Iowa Synod and congregational council, Pastor _____ has agreed to be the interim pastor at _____.

P: I commit myself to this new trust and responsibility. I promise to fulfill my responsibilities to the best of my ability in accordance with scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and constitution of this congregation. Will you as a congregation receive me as your pastor and partner in ministry as we seek God's call for us in this interim period?

C: We will.

L: As a member and leader of this congregation, I ask you to join me in support of Pastor _____; to pray for him/her, to help and honor him/her for his/her work's sake and in all things to strive to live together in the peace and unity of Christ. Will you join me in this support?

C: We will.

L: Welcome, Pastor _____. WE now officially begin our partnership in this interim ministry in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

C: Amen

P: Let us pray. Almighty God, you call your people in baptism into the death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ. May we be renewed daily by the gift of your Holy Spirit and may we be especially aware of your leading during this interim period. Grant us faithfulness and peace in all that we do so that you may be glorified among us. We pray through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

C: Amen