

## When You Will Be Ending an Appointment

### Begin Leaving Immediately

Begin praying for your current congregation, for the transition, for your “next” ...

Begin planning. An [Ending Well Pastor Transition Plan Template](#) is available if helpful.

Do not initiate major new programs that you will not be able to conclude.

As the time draws near, mention the transition with increasing frequency.

### Wrap Up Well

What do you wish you had known when you started this appointment? Let that help inform the information you compile and share with your successor.

Prepare essential information for your successor and be sure important files are up to date. (See: [TRANSITION CHECKLIST for Appointment Changes](#))

Close all church-related accounts and leave passcodes/passwords for all systems.

Do not take church records with you.

Do a walkthrough of the office and the parsonage, if provided, with SPRC and Trustees representatives. Leave them clean and move-in ready.

### Nurture Good Successor Relationships

Work with the congregation (committees, ministry teams, staff, etc.) to prepare the way for their next pastor.

Talk about the next pastor only in positive terms.

Avoid making comparisons between yourself and the next pastor.

Work with your successor to provide good information about the congregation. Do not burden her/him with personal opinions. Spend quality time together with an agreed-upon agenda.

### Stay Until You Leave

Continue vital ministry; avoid emotional withdrawal.

Be judicious in talking of your new appointment; respond to questions but there is no need to elaborate with details, observations, plans, etc.

Settle as many open issues as possible, including (and especially) staff difficulties.

*“Great is the art of beginning, but greater is the art of ending.” – Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*

## Healthy Boundaries in Transitions

### No Contact for at Least 1 Year

It is the **STRONG RECOMMENDATION** of the Cabinet that there be no contact with the congregation where the appointment is ending for at least one year – no phone, no text, no in person meeting, etc. As pastor, you need time to establish relationship with their new congregation or establish yourself in your next season. As a congregation, they need time to establish relationship with their new pastor. An explicit period of separation facilitates this change in relationship. Refer any contact back to the new pastor or the S/PPRC chair.

### Special Occasions

When the pastoral appointment ends, the pastoral duties for the congregants are handed to the new pastor.

If, after the 1-year separation, there is a request to co-officiate a wedding, funeral, baptism, or other special occasion, the request must come through the current pastor. Pastor, if you receive a request from a parishioner, refer them back to the current pastor.

### Staying "Friends"/ Social Media

Set clear boundaries when communicating with members of the congregation after your time with them is ended:

- No church talk
- No counseling
- No discipling/mentoring

### Don't Play the Blame Game

There are many factors that go into pastoral transitions in the United Methodist Church.

Do not place blame for the transition.

Do the important work of ending the current pastorate well and starting the new pastorate well so that the mission of the church continues.

## Communicating Well as You End

### The Good-bye Letter

Whether included in a newsletter or in a separate publication, a good-bye letter can help congregants understand why you are leaving, understand your ownership of this change (even if it is not of your request, you are making the change), and specify your new relationship with them (you will no longer be their pastor).

### Communication with the Congregation

As you communicate with the congregation

- Say thank you
- Stay positive
- Share ownership for the change
- Do not blame others for the move
- Clarify in spoken and written communication your new relationship with the congregation – reiterate the boundaries that are important for them and for you in the coming months.
- Affirm love and friendship while releasing persons from the pastoral relationship.

### Communication with the Community

Identify those with whom you have relationship in the community.

Consider how to best connect with each to express gratitude, share news of your departure, and provide introduction to the new pastor: a phone call, an email or letter, a personal visit or invitation to coffee/lunch.

### Communicating with Individuals

Identify the relationships that are important to end well:

- People currently in key leadership roles
- Leaders who were instrumental over the course of your pastorate
- Those with whom you have had differences

As you plan these encounters, consider how to best connect with each: a phone call, an email or letter, a personal visit or invitation to coffee/lunch.

Be gracious to everyone, especially those with whom you have had difficulty.

*The art of communication is the language of leadership.* – James Humes

## Recognizing the “Lasts”

### The Last Worship

Plan for recognizing and celebrating your time together as pastor and congregation during the last worship service you will share.

“An Order of Farewell to a Pastor” (United Methodist Book of Worship #598) provides a suggested litany, a closing prayer and hymn suggestions. If “An Order for the Celebration of an Appointment” (UMBOW #595) will be used, include a litany of leaving symbols of ministry.

In a non-traditional worship setting, the intent of the formal liturgy can be shared informally by the pastor and a lay leader.

### The Last Sermon(s)

Final sermons provide opportunity to help the congregation grieve and say goodbye, and for you to “prepare the way” for the new pastor, to say good-bye and to let go of ministry.

### Last Meetings

Plan for the last church council, committee meetings, ministry team meetings, small group meetings, and/or staff meetings.

Include a time of sharing stories; acknowledge both triumphs and struggles; affirm God's presence and continued work in and through them.

Questions that can be used to prompt the sharing:

- How are we different today from how we were when the appointment began?
- What accomplishments in ministry are we most grateful for?
- What challenges have we overcome and what did we learn from those situations?
- What do we wish we might have done had time and resources allowed?

### Last Visits

Plan your final home visits and/or nursing home visits.

Consider ending the visit with a time of prayer that includes releasing the person into the new pastor's care.

### Last Contacts

Arrange personal visits, write personal notes, and/or make phone calls where appropriate.

Identify and call key leaders on your last official day to thank them and encourage their support of the new pastor.

*God be with you till we meet again...* (UMH #672, Jeremiah Rankin)

## Caring for Yourself and Your Family

### Allow the Space to Grieve and Celebrate

Allow yourself the freedom and the time to grieve ... and to celebrate. Expect a mixture of feelings: grief, joy, guilt, excitement, sadness, etc. Be kind to yourself. Admit any unfinished business without blaming yourself for not accomplishing all of the ministry you intended.

Encourage loved ones to grieve the change. Grieve with them and help them find appropriate ways to say good-bye.

Include family in the celebration of your ministry; acknowledge their contributions to the ministry.

### Be Generous with Self-care

Protect (even extend) your personal spiritual disciplines during this season.

Schedule time for Sabbath rest weekly.

Consider planning vacation time or renewal leave in the weeks before the move. Allowing time to rest and re-focus between appointments is helpful for clergy and for the congregation.

### Reflect and Dream

Set aside time to reflect on the pastorate that is ending and invite God to shape your dreams for the one that will soon begin.

The following questions can be used as prompts to begin your reflection:

- What have I learned during this pastorate that I want to incorporate into my new ministry?
- What patterns from this appointment do I want to continue? Which ones do I NOT want to fall into in the next?
- What disciplines have sustained me? What new ones might I need to cultivate?
- In whom did I find collegiality and support? How will I look for these now?
- What might be possible with the new congregation/next season – by virtue of location, history, gifts, resources – that wasn't possible with the previous congregation?
- What excites me about the new context, both church and community?
- What deficiencies might I be bringing to the new work and how am I going to address them?
- What are going to be the crucial questions I need to ask, and to whom should these be addressed?

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want... - Psalm 23:1*

## Reminders as You Begin the New Appointment

### Change and Transition

“People don’t resist change — they resist transition.” - William Bridges, *Managing Transitions*

Change is an external event. It is realized in a new outcome: the new pastor, a new worship experience, a new policy, etc. People negotiate such outcomes without much trauma.

Transition is the psychological process people go through when changing from one situation to another, coming to terms with the loss of the old and learning to embrace the new. Transition begins with ending and continues long after the actual change. This is where people struggle.

### Honor the Church's (and Previous Pastor's) Ministry

“Every local church has its own unique culture. That culture is derived from years and decades of the people living together, working together, suffering together, and rejoicing together. Its culture represents the amalgamation of all the things that make that church what it is and the values that they hold dear. Without their culture, the church has no identity, and any threat to that culture brings a danger of losing their identity.” – Roy L. Spore,

<https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/understanding-and-honoring-your-congregations-unique-culture/>

- Acknowledge progress and achievements accomplished before you arrived.
- Do not criticize the former pastor or work done before you started.
- Don't be threatened by positive comments about the past.
- Honor traditions long enough to understand the motivation behind them.

### Be the Guest

In the early weeks of a new pastorate, engage humbly like a guest invited into someone's home:

- Show appreciation
- Be gracious
- Be present

### Pay the Rent

Establish a presence in the life of the congregation.

Demonstrate competency in preaching and leading worship, teaching and pastoral care, organizing and leading.

## First Impressions

### Before you Arrive

- Pack a “first day” box – the things you will want on your first day in the office
- Get to know names and faces
- Research the community

### First Letter/Written Communication

Write an introductory letter of greeting to your new congregation. Include a desire to meet them in worship on your first Sunday, as well as information about yourself and your family.

If sent separately prior to your arrival, have this printed on your previous church's stationary. Alternatively, it can be included in a newsletter or other publication that arrives before you do.

### First Days in the Office

- Unpack your “First Day” box. You can unpack the rest of your office in the early weeks.
- Introduce yourself and spend time with staff and leaders
- Call key people: officers, lay leaders, retired clergy
- Community visits

### First Worship

- Walk through the service(s) with the previous pastor, an experienced lay liturgist, and/or an associate pastor on staff. Ask questions. Don't take anything for granted.
- Include a time of introduction and a ritual of welcome, see “An Order for the Celebration of an Appointment” (UMBOW #595)
- The sermon: this is a day for a good, solid sermon; a day to share your faith, your call to ministry and/or your faith journey; an opportunity for the congregation to begin to get to know you.
- Be visible and available to meet people before and after worship.

### First Meetings: Church Council, S/PPRC, staff, etc.

Include a time to get to know one another and to share expectations and hopes for working together.

### Things NOT To Do During Your First Week

- [Don't] Spend the entire week unpacking, at home or in your office.
- [Don't] Change the church office routine. There will be time later to reorganize; spend your early days on relationships and leadership.
- [Don't] Share too many of your expectations. Listen to their concerns, hopes and dreams and consider how they will shape your leadership. “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” – Steven Covey, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Leaders*.
- [Don't] Neglect yourself, your spiritual life, and your own personal and family time.

## The First Weeks of a New Appointment

### Spend Time with People and Build Relationships

Make building relationships your highest priority. Visit people with pastoral needs and those with key leadership responsibilities.

Schedule listening sessions in homes or at the church to gather input and hear their perspective of the ministry. Potential questions include:

- What does this church do well?
- What is the biggest challenge/opportunity facing the church?
- If you were to ask God for a mid-size miracle for the church, what would it be?
- What are you afraid I (the new pastor) will change?
- How has the church helped you grow spiritually?
- What population in the church is not engaged in ministry? What population in the community is not being served?

Meet community leaders, including other clergy.

### Learn about Your New Ministry Setting

Study data to understand the church and community.

Make careful assessments of strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities.

### Be Cautious about Making Immediate Changes

Listen and observe with an open mind to discover strengths and needs.

Earn the right to change things before initiating changes.

### Build Trust

Be authentic, honest, and genuine. Express joy in being in your new ministry setting.

Make time to listen – to learn their stories, to build community, to discover gifts and graces, to learn who are leaders and influencers. Listen before offering solutions.

Let people get to know you and allow them time to learn to trust you.

Focus on the congregation, its mission and its future, not your agenda.



## Ending Well Resource Sheet

“50 Ways to Improve Pastoral Transitions” – Lewis Center for Church Leadership,  
<https://www.churchleadership.com/50-ways/50-ways-to-improve-pastoral-transitions-2/>

Articles on Pastoral Transitions, Lewis Center for Church Leadership,  
<https://www.churchleadership.com/tag/pastoral-transitions/>

Making a Good Move: Opening the Door to a Successful Pastorate, Michael J. Coyner, Abingdon Press, 2000.

Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors, Edward A. White, editor, Rowman & Littlefield, 1990.

Ten Commandments for Pastors Leaving a Congregation, Lawrence W. Farris, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006.