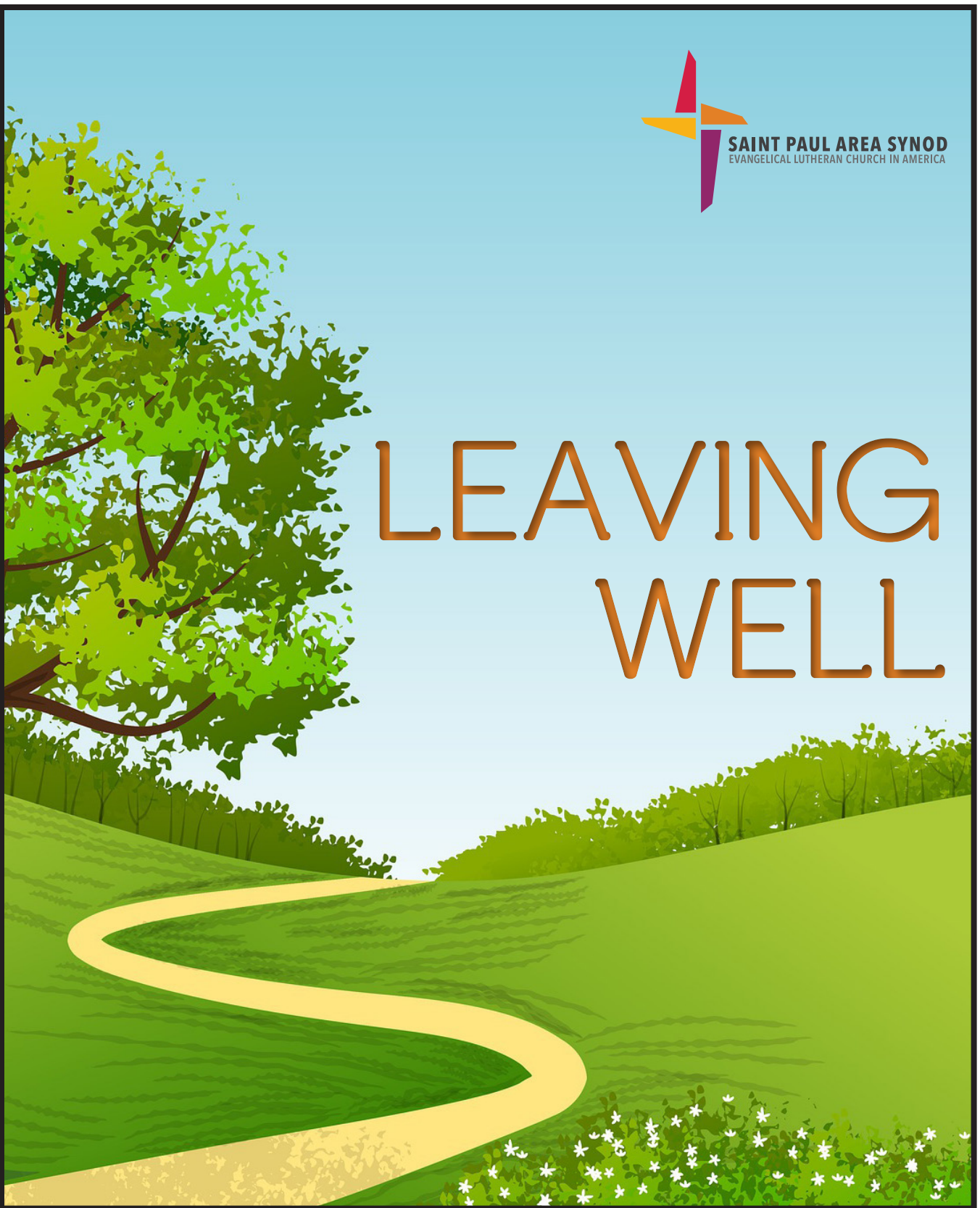




SAINT PAUL AREA SYNOD
EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

LEAVING WELL



a guide for **retired pastors & deacons**

Leaving Well: A Guide for Retired Pastors and Deacons

A Pastoral Approach to Retirement and Leaving a Congregation.¹

It can be difficult when a pastor or deacon retires and leaves a congregation. Members may feel the loss of a beloved friend, a trusted confidant, and a spiritual guide. The rostered minister may feel the loss of both professional and personal relationships. The rostered minister's family may experience similar types of loss as well. During and after the transition, it is common to experience grief and a sense of dislocation. However, for the health and flourishing of all, it is crucial for the rostered minister to graciously leave well.

Changing Roles

As pastors and deacons, our relationships with those we serve are shaped primarily by the functions of the ministerial office, which give us privileged access to our parishioners' personal and private lives. These relationships are often deepened by participation in the most formative milestones of life: births and deaths, weddings and divorces, confirmations, graduations, and all manners of life experiences. In these roles, we are often privy to a parishioner's deepest sorrows, guilts, hopes, and joys. However, when that role ends, there may be a tendency on both sides to continue the relationship as is.

It is vitally important, when retiring and leaving, to lovingly cease all activities of the ministerial office for the sake of those served and to open the way for the new pastor or deacon to best serve the community.

These activities and duties include:

- Performing weddings, funerals, or baptisms of members of the former congregation (this includes roles as musicians and planners, as well as officiants);
- Making visits or providing pastoral care to members of the former congregation;
- Advising members of the former congregation on matters of congregational life and governance;
- Offering advice or criticism regarding the successor rostered minister;
- Teaching or leading Bible studies for groups still connected with the former congregation.

Why Leave Well

How a rostered minister and the congregation understand the church can affect the ability to leave well. The ELCA affirms that the church is centered in God's mission and that deacons and pastors are called and ordained servants of Christ's Church. A congregation calls a rostered minister to serve for a specific time and place.

¹ Resources consulted in the development of this document include: *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors*, Edward A. White, ed. (Alban Institute, 1990) and "Pastoral Ethics and Leave-Taking—Towards a Pastoral Ethic Upon Leaving a Congregation" from the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod and Southwestern Texas Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (accessible online here: <https://mywt5-files.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/72/2019/05/31122832/LeaveTaking.pdf>).

Effects of Continued Pastoral Contact on the Congregation

When a rostered minister fails to let go of his/her former office:

- Members may delay or deny the necessary grief work and get emotionally “stuck”;
- Members may turn to the outgoing rostered minister for comfort or care, depriving both the community and the successor of the opportunity to build the strength that comes from shared struggles;
- Members may be/become confused about where and how to focus their commitment, creating unnecessary conflicts and comparisons;
- The unseen (or seen) presence of the outgoing rostered minister may hinder the congregation’s ability to have open dialogue necessary to work through a challenge or problem;
- The unseen (or seen) presence of the outgoing rostered minister may undermine the successor’s authority, subverting their credibility, morale, and effectiveness;
- The former pastor or deacon is betraying the vows they took at their ordination as well as the constitutional requirements of the ELCA.
- Ongoing involvement of a former pastor or deacon is a betrayal of the vows at ordination and the constitutional requirements of the ELCA.²

Managing relationships with former members.

Rostered ministers often develop friendships with parishioners in a congregation that go beyond the formal roles of called minister. It is possible for these friendships to continue as long as healthy boundaries are observed. It is incumbent upon the former pastor or deacon and their family to zealously refrain from discussing the congregation’s leadership, successor’s performance, ongoing congregational issues and challenges, and any other aspects of the life of the congregation. Whenever questions or issues related to the ministry arise, it is imperative that you, as former pastor or deacon, redirect them back to your successor and/or council leadership.

When Asked, What Shall I Say?

Certain requests are common and powerful, “Pastor, you baptized and confirmed our daughter, we think it would be meaningful if you performed the wedding also,” or “As a deacon, you were the musician for all the major events in our son’s life, we think it would be meaningful if you helped plan and played for

² Guidelines for Ministers of Word and Sacrament can be found in *Manual of Policies and Procedures for Management of the Rosters* Part 1, section D.2.b: “A retired pastor should not remain a member of or regularly attend the congregation served at the time of retirement. Transferring one’s membership to another congregation allows the successor pastor to assume pastoral leadership more readily” and section D.2.c: “At the time of retirement a Minister of Word and Sacrament is no longer pastor of a congregation and therefore must discontinue the functions of the pastoral office in the congregation previously served unless specifically authorized to do so.” Related guidelines for Ministers of Word and Service are in Part 2, section D.2.b. The full document is accessible here: https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Policies_Procedures_Roster_Mgmt.pdf. See also the *Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Saint Paul Area Synod*, †S14.19: “Ministers of Word and Sacrament 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” and its related provision for Ministers of Word and Service †S14.44. For synodical or churchwide calls, see §7.43.02 for Ministers of Word and Sacrament and §7.73.02 for Ministers of Word and Service.

the wedding also,” or, “As a deacon who led the youth group all the time our children were involved, we want you to preach at our wedding.” When responding, care must be taken to be clear about appropriate boundaries and not put your successor on the spot. An appropriate response might be: “I am honored you ask, but it would not be appropriate for me to be involved with the wedding since I no longer serve in the congregation.” Similar responses can be offered in the instances of illness, sympathy, or death. If you have a question about how to respond to a former member’s request, consult the current pastor of the congregation.

LEAVE-TAKING

As you prepare to retire and leave a congregation, you might be overwhelmed by feelings of grief, anger, eagerness, relief, or confusion. In order to help smooth the transition, it is highly recommended that both rostered minister and congregation, with the help of synod staff, lay out a clear process for leave-taking. Making the decision to leave and announcing it to the congregation is just the beginning. In order to leave well, it is recommended that both the retiring deacon or pastor and congregation follow some simple practices:

Be Spiritually Aware. As communities of faith, we are guided by God through Christ by the Holy Spirit. Tapping into the treasures of faith—prayer and study, worship and reflection—is essential for leaving well. As you approach retirement, a rostered minister might consider taking a spiritual retreat or entering into an intentional discernment practice, asking for ongoing prayer support, or seeking spiritual direction or support outside the congregation.

Be Clear About Timing. When you have made the decision to retire, you will engage in discussion and discernment with the Office of the Bishop. Official congregational notice should be given first to the chief lay officer (president or council chair), congregational council next, staff colleagues, and then the entire congregation.

Be Emotionally Aware. Leaving a congregation can spark deep emotions. Consider emotions beyond your immediate awareness and control.

Share Pertinent Information. The congregation does not need to know every detail of your leaving. However, there is information that should be shared for the health of the congregation, such as: a clear transition plan and timeline, a comprehensive list of duties and responsibilities, concise descriptions and contact information for all relevant partners engaged in ministry, user names and passwords for all online tools and resources, even insider information known only to yourself and a few other leaders (like where the spare key to your office is hidden). The more informed the congregation and successor pastor are, the better.

Maintain Clear Boundaries. During the transition process, it is imperative to maintain appropriate boundaries with the congregation. Focus on the duties of your present ministry and pastoral care

for those you serve. All specific activities relating to the transition should be left to the congregational council and synod.³

Tie Up Loose Ends. When a pastor or deacon leaves, it is common for certain ongoing tasks and duties to be unfinished. When possible, a rostered minister should strive to complete tasks or make sure all others are handed off to appropriate staff or lay leaders. Make sure that all parochial records (baptisms, deaths, weddings, and membership) are updated fully and all financial matters have been resolved.

Participate Fully in the Exit Interview. A retiring pastor or deacon can help a congregation move forward by offering careful, thoughtful, and constructive comments about the opportunities and challenges of the congregation. To do so is not a boundary violation. A member of the bishop's staff will facilitate an exit interview prior to the departure of the rostered minister.

Be Grateful, Humble, and Authentic. Be thankful in an abundant and honest fashion for the love and support of the people. Accept their appreciative comments and gifts graciously. Acknowledge the accomplishments that have occurred in the years of your service.

Avoid Harmful Action. On rare occasions, anxiety and emotion over leaving can lead to behavior which can harm the congregation and your relationship with members. One should take care to avoid such actions, which include, but are not limited to: publicly wavering on one's decision, withdrawing the resignation, being publicly elated at being able to leave, using the occasion to accuse one's accusers or fault the congregation's circumstances, or leaving abruptly. These actions can easily have the effect of feeding rumors, stunting the congregation's emotional processes, or polarizing the congregation. To give pain to others in order to ease pain in oneself is not a reflection of Christ's love nor the vows taken by rostered ministers.

³ In April 2021 the ELCA Church Council adopted a revised version of *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline*. The following section was included to address the expectations of those who leave a congregation to take a new call or who retire. "**Relationship with prior congregation(s) or ministry:** Rostered ministers who have resigned or retired from or otherwise no longer officially serve a congregation or other ministry shall honor the integrity of the congregation or ministry. They shall respect and honor the current rostered minister(s) and mission of the congregation or ministry they no longer are called to serve. They shall decline invitations from members to perform pastoral acts and refrain from asking members to directly or indirectly seek permission to perform such acts from the currently serving rostered minister. They shall not participate or interfere, whether personally or through a proxy, in the life of the congregation or ministry in any way, unless invited to participate by the current rostered minister(s) in conjunction with the congregation council or governing board. Such interference constitutes conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office or retirement status."

FINAL STEPS

SPAS Cohort for Retired Pastors and Deacons

Leaving a congregation is challenging for any rostered minister throughout their years in ministry. Retiring at the same time can easily compound feelings of loss and grief, dislocation and separation. One way to help ease the transition is to walk through the process with others who are experiencing the same thing.

The Saint Paul Area Synod has formed a Cohort for Retired Pastors and Deacons to help during this time. It is highly recommended that you enter the cohort three months prior to leaving the congregation and/or entering retirement and participate in cohort activities for a minimum of three months after leaving. You may also enter earlier and stay longer if you find the cohort fruitful. The SPAS Cohort for Retired Pastors and Deacons will be led by a colleague who has been through the leaving/retirement process and is designed to provide a safe and supportive spiritual space for grieving, discerning, and looking towards the new future into which God is calling you. Synod staff will assist along the way.

Covenant of Retiring and Leaving a Congregation

As you retire and leave, it helps the congregation to be aware of how the relationship between pastor and people is changing. The clarity helps the grieving and healing process and makes it more likely that the congregation will be able to turn in anticipation and readiness for the next chapter of its history. To document and declare the changing relationship, covenants are helpful. The Saint Paul Area Synod has prepared the following covenant for such use and highly recommends that rostered minister and congregation adopt it during the transition process. Templates for pastors and for deacons are included here.

COVENANT OF RETIRING AND LEAVING A CONGREGATION AS A PASTOR

When a rostered minister leaves a congregation there is often a sense of sadness and confusion. This covenant is designed to clarify the changes in relationship between Pastor _____ and _____.

1. The retirement of Pastor _____ signals the conclusion of his/her pastoral actions for the congregation of _____. These actions include but are not limited to officiating at baptisms, weddings or funerals. Additionally, Pastor _____ will not engage in the life of the congregation by attending worship or by pastoral visits to members in hospitals, care facilities or homes unless under extraordinary circumstances as directed by the successor pastor or synodical bishop.
2. Pastor _____ and family will seek a new congregation to join, investing their talents, time and finances in that new community of faith.
3. As Pastor _____ is a member of the local community, to best encourage the ongoing mission and ministry of _____, he/she is ethically bound not to engage in conversations and actions, whether critical or not, of congregational plans or the successor pastor. Should issues arise, the synodical bishop and staff will guide the congregation by practical action and prayer when called upon by the church council and leadership of the congregation.
4. It is difficult to leave a congregation of people one has come to care for and respect. As the congregation looks forward to their successor pastor and continuing mission from God, Pastor _____ is encouraged to join the synod-supported cohort for retired pastors and deacons to help them grieve, discern, and look towards the new future into which God is calling them.

Signed:

Pastor _____

Congregational President _____

Synod Representative _____

Date _____

COVENANT OF RETIRING AND LEAVING A CONGREGATION AS A DEACON

When a rostered minister leaves a congregation there is often a sense of sadness and confusion. This covenant is designed to clarify the changes in relationship between Deacon _____ and _____.

1. The retirement of Deacon _____ signals the conclusion of his/her ministerial actions for the congregation of _____. These actions include involvement in the worship services and milestone events of the congregation. Additionally, Deacon _____ will not engage in the life of the congregation by attending worship or funerals or by visiting members in hospitals, care facilities or homes unless under extraordinary circumstances as directed by the successor pastor or synodical bishop.
2. Deacon _____ and family will seek a new congregation to join, investing their talents, time and finances in that new community of faith.
3. As Deacon _____ is a member of the local community, to best encourage the ongoing mission and ministry of _____, he/she is ethically bound not to engage in conversations and actions, whether critical or not, of congregational plans or the successor deacon. Should issues arise, the synodical bishop and staff will guide the congregation by practical action and prayer when called upon by the church council and leadership of the congregation.
4. It is difficult to leave a congregation of people one has come to care for and respect. As the congregation looks forward to their successor deacon and continuing mission from God, Deacon _____ is encouraged to join the synod-supported cohort for retired pastors and deacons to help them grieve, discern, and look towards the new future into which God is calling them.

Signed:

Deacon _____

Congregational President _____

Synod Representative _____

Date _____